for the ones who try again

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by hujwernoo

Summary

Klaus is *pretty* sure he's hallucinating. He can't remember taking any drugs that would cause hallucinations, usually avoids them like the plague. He fucking hates that shit, the entire reason he's an addict is because he already sees things other people can't, why would he want *more* of that, but he must have taken something and forgotten, because it's the only explanation for the scene in front of him.

Because in front of him is *Five.*

Little Number Five. Their thirteen-year-old brother, the one who ran out on them seventeen years ago and never came back. The one that left a gaping hole in the middle of their family, just as big as Ben if not bigger, because no one ever knew what happened to him. The one Klaus tried to conjure, night after night, not sure whether to be happy or not when he kept failing.

"I'm back," Five says, staring straight at him, and Klaus almost flinches from the intensity in his eyes. "I'm home."

Time to save the world, everyone.

Notes

Okay, a few notes before we begin:

This story will follow a schedule of posting a chapter every two days, instead of my usual M/W/F. I am one and a half chapters away from completing it, so there's no worry about running out. I'll probably finish writing it before I post the next chapter. Isn't productivity grand?

As you may have noted, this story is going to have 43 chapters, and it's going to top out at around 120,000 words or so. You're welcome.

And finally: Thank you all so, so much for your support so far, I couldn't have kept going without you. Y'all are the best.

- Translation into Français available: TRAD - for the ones who try again by Loclo4

Chapter 1

Klaus is *pretty* sure he's hallucinating. He can't remember taking any drugs that would cause hallucinations, usually avoids them like the plague. He fucking hates that shit, the entire reason he's an addict is because he already sees things other people can't, why would he want *more* of that, but he must have taken something and forgotten, because it's the only explanation for the scene in front of him.

Because in front of him is *Five.*

Little Number Five. Their thirteen-year-old brother, the one who ran out on them seventeen years ago and never came back. The one that left a gaping hole in the middle of their family, just as big as Ben if not bigger, because no one ever knew what happened to him. The one Klaus tried to conjure, night after night, not sure whether to be happy or not when he kept failing.

"I'm back," Five says, staring straight at him, and Klaus almost flinches from the intensity in his eyes. "I'm home."

Then he collapses on the ground, body going slack, and for the first time Klaus notices the blood on his face.

"Fuck," Klaus swears in unison with Diego and Ben. Diego breaks ranks first, running towards Five, but the rest of them are close behind.

Diego turns Five over, and - they all freeze.

"Oh god," Klaus hears Vanya whisper. "His *arm*...."

Five's right arm is gone, just *vanished,* and the oversized shirt he's wearing has the sleeve cut off to reveal the stump. The sight is - *wrong,* and Klaus feels nauseous looking at it.

"He's bleeding," Ben's voice breaks through the haze, and Klaus looks at him. Ben's face is pale, but he's not staring at the nothingness where Five's arm is supposed to be. He's looking a little to the side of that. "Klaus, he's still bleeding, he needs *help* -"

"Right!" Klaus yelps, and shoves his hands on where the-fuck-is-all-that-blood-coming-from. "Guys, bleeding! Stop the bleeding!"

That breaks everyone out of their frozen horror, and Diego gathers Five up in his arms. "He needs to get to the infirmary," his brother snaps, and Klaus has never agreed with anything so much in his *life.*

They scramble inside, and Luther doesn't even protest Diego being the one to carry Five. Actually, Luther has a sort of glazed look in his eyes, and maybe Klaus would be more curious about that if their long-lost brother hadn't just popped out of a giant glowy ball of lightning and collapsed in a pool of his own blood.

“Someone get Mom,” Allison says, face a few shades lighter than normal.

“On it!” Klaus says, maybe too loudly. He trips over his own feet, but rights himself well enough, and goes sprinting through the house. “MOM! MOMMY COULD YOU MAYBE COME HERE, PRETTY PLEASE!”

Ben runs through the wall and points behind him. “She’s in there!”

“You’re a lifesaver, Benny-boy,” Klaus says, and rounds the corner to find Mom staring into space and idly humming.

“Mom!” Klaus says. “I don’t really understand what just happened, but, uh, Five kind of needs to be stitched up. Like, now.”

Mom turns her head to look at him. She looks - confused. “Sweetheart?” she says.

“We need help,” Klaus repeats. He points wildly. “In the infirmary. Fi-one of us is hurt.”

Mom frowns and tilts her head. “....Should I make cookies?”

Klaus blinks. His hand falls to his side.

“Uh,” he says. “Mom?”

Ben looks just as confused as he is, which is good because that means Klaus *isn’t* misunderstanding her, and bad because Klaus doesn’t know what to do when *Ben* doesn’t know what to do. Ben always knows what to do, and even if Klaus rarely ever listens it’s nice to know there’s someone who isn’t a total disaster around here.

Mom is still looking at him, slightly confusedly.

“Master Klaus? One of you is hurt?”

Klaus gasps and whirls around. “Jesus, Pogo, warn a guy!” Then he does a double-take. “Pogo! You’re a doctor, right? Five came back and he needs help.”

Pogo’s eyes widen. “Master Five has returned?”

“Yeah, and he *really* needs help but Mom is - being weird - and we should really get to the infirmary, please?” Klaus flutters his hands.

“I - of course,” Pogo’s face hardens. “Quickly.”

“Yeah, that sounds good, let’s hurry,” Klaus follows Pogo as he limps as fast as he can. Ben goes on ahead. Best scouting ghost.

They arrive at the infirmary to find everyone yelling at each other. Klaus can’t even fake being surprised.

“Do you have a better idea?!” Diego demands of Allison, his hands clamped down on Five’s torso.

Allison’s own hands are pressing down on Five’s shoulder, the one with a jarring lack of arm, and she’s glaring at Diego with an equal amount of heat. “We are not doing that, Mom’s coming, we just need to keep him from bleeding -”

“Allison’s right,” Luther says, standing in the corner with clenched fists. “Everyone just calm down -”

Vanya is white as milk, staring at Five’s slack face. She’s holding Five’s only hand. She’s the only one who notices their arrival, and her indrawn breath alerts the others.

“Pogo?” Allison says as they enter. Pogo falters at the sight of Five’s missing limb, but he recovers quickly and moves to the cabinets of medical supplies.

“Everyone except Master Luther, out,” Pogo says briskly.

Vanya jerks. “What - no -”

“Now,” Pogo says. “Unless any of you have been keeping up with your field medicine?”

Klaus winces. He has a feeling that being able to find a vein with a needle blindfolded four times out of five doesn’t really count.

“I’ll keep watch,” Ben promises, and Klaus shoots him a grateful smile as everyone reluctantly trickles out of the room. Luther takes over pressing down on Five’s injuries.

The door closes shut behind them, and they’re left staring at the carved wood. The room falls into a deafening silence.

“So,” Klaus says at last. “Hell of a homecoming.”

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Hours later, Pogo steps out of the infirmary, looking exhausted.

They all jump to their feet. Aside from Diego, who’s already on his feet because he’s been pacing nonstop. They look at Pogo in equal parts dread and anticipation. Vanya and Allison clutch at their arms, where they both bear cheery bandaids over needle-marks. Both of them were called in to donate blood, but that was some time ago, and they’ve been worrying ever since.

“Master Five is stable,” Pogo announces, and it’s like the entire room lets out a sigh of relief. Klaus sighs a little too, even though he already knew that. Ben loiters in the corner, hands in his hoodie, and he gives a small smile at Pogo’s declaration even though he’s the one who came through five minutes before and told Klaus the news.

Vanya steps forward, hesitantly. “Can - can we see him?”

Pogo gives her a level look, then nods. “I must insist on everyone remaining quiet, and not crowding him, but yes.”

*We’ll see how **that** one turns out,* Klaus thinks to himself, but he’s not going to turn down the opportunity to reassure himself that he didn’t imagine the past few hours.

When they file into the room, Luther is standing by the top of the bed, looking at Five’s face with an inscrutable expression.

“Five,” Vanya breathes, and runs to his side. She was the closest to him, Klaus remembers. She and Ben. He glances over at his ghostly brother, who is staring at Five with that look Klaus knows means he’s wishing he was corporeal.

Five - well, he looks *marginally* better than when he fell out of the portal-thing. The blood is gone, at least, and the oversized clothes cut off him and replaced with an equally oversized but blessedly clean hospital gown.

“Wh-what happened to him?” Diego says, and grimaces at himself.

Pogo goes to put away the supplies strewn about. “Aside from his missing arm, which is fully healed, his only injuries were two gunshot wounds in his shoulder and torso.”

Everyone inhales sharply. “He was *shot?*” Allison demands, eyes flashing. Diego’s hands go to his knives and he shifts into a ready stance, as if the gunman is hiding in the corner. Vanya’s free hand covers her mouth. Ben’s hands curl into fists.

Klaus frowns at Five. “What do you mean, it’s healed?”

There’s silence in the wake of his words, and everyone blinks at him.

“Well, yeah, someone shot him and that’s bad,” Klaus says, waving his hands. “But seriously, what’s up with his arm? It’s really all healed?”

Luther glares at Klaus. “I think the injuries that *put his life at risk* are more important, Klaus.”

“What do you mean, Klaus?” Ben asks.

This is why Ben is his favorite. He shoots Ben a smile and turns back to his siblings. “Sure, but aren’t you a little curious? I mean, doesn’t he look the same? The *exact* same? Thirteen years old? I don’t know about you, but I remember him leaving with both arms. But here he is, looking the same, except he’s minus an arm now, and that shit takes *time* to heal. He should look older. Right?” he says to Pogo.

Pogo frowns at Five. “That - is true.”

There are a myriad of confused glances that look from Pogo to Five. Klaus would be offended that they don’t consider him a reliable source, but - well, he’s kind of surprised to see Pogo agreeing with him too.

“So - what are you suggesting?” Vanya says.

“Fuck if I know,” Klaus shrugs.

“He wanted to try time-travel,” Ben says, a distant look in his eye. “Maybe - maybe it has something to do with that.”

“Does it matter?” Diego demands, still fingering his knives. “I’m thinking the ‘shooting’ part is a little more immediately relevant.”

“Diego’s right,” Allison says, with an air of finality. “We can ask Five about his arm when he wakes up. Right now, we need to make sure he’s safe.”

Vanya sits up straighter. “You think they’ll try to come after him?”

“If they do, they’re dead,” Diego states. Luther nods grimly, and the sight of them *agreeing* is so unexpected Klaus does a double take. Allison has a steely look in her eyes, and even Vanya looks down at Five and sets her jaw.

Klaus feels - lost. He glances at Five, and isn’t quite sure what to think. Five looks young - were any of them *really* that small once? - and the bandages on his shoulder are a stark white under the infirmary lights. Klaus hopes he wakes up soon, hopes he can explain everything, hopes he gets better. There isn’t really any sense of - rage, or anything, though. He thinks of people trying to hurt his brother, and sure, he doesn’t want that to happen, but he doesn’t feel the protective urge everyone else is apparently experiencing.

He stays quiet.

A machine beeps in the corner, and Pogo goes over to it. Klaus tilts his head to look at Ben, who still has that same longing look of wanting to interact with someone other than Klaus. That look always makes Klaus feel - inadequate. Which, yes, he *knows,* thank you very much, but for once Klaus doesn’t blame Ben for it. Getting Five back is something they never really expected, not after so long.

“Master Five should be waking up soon,” Pogo says from the corner. “I will go and inform Grace of recent developments.” He leaves.

They’re left standing awkwardly in silence, scattered around the room. Klaus starts counting backwards from thirty in his head.

Diego turns to Luther at twenty-one. “How is he?” he says, stance tense.

Luther frowns. “Pogo just told you -”

“Yeah,” Diego interrupts, ignoring Luther’s glare, “But that was the bare bones. Are there any complications? Or, hell, older injuries like his arm? If this is a chronic thing it could tell us how dogged his pursuers are going to be.”

“No, of course not, we would have mentioned that,” Luther protests.

“Really?” Diego says, raising an eyebrow. “Are you sure? Hey, did you even work on Five, or did you just hand Pogo things and scurry around the room?”

Klaus’ countdown reaches zero, and he checks that he’s out of the line of fire.

“At least I was *in* the room,” Luther says, looming. “Unlike some people, I don’t faint at the sight of needles.”

“Guys, can we not do this?” Allison says tiredly.

“Speak for yourself,” Klaus tells her. “I want some entertainment after that shitshow.”

““Shut up, Klaus,”” Luther and Diego say in perfect synchronicity. They glare at each other.

“Allison’s right, we shouldn’t -” Vanya starts, only to be cut off by a downright vicious glare from Diego.

“Would’ve thought you’d enjoy this, Vanya. Got enough material for your sequel yet?”

Vanya flinches and falls quiet. Klaus tilts his head at that, because he wasn’t aware Vanya regretted The Book even a bit. He’s not a fan of The Book, even before it got to the part about how he’s a useless attention-whore junkie (not in those exact words, but reading between the lines it was pretty obvious what she thought of him). He’s not surprised she considers him as such, but he’s pretty sure she didn’t think through the consequences of telling literally the entire world about his less-savory habits.

Maybe she has by now? Klaus wonders what changed.

Diego and Luther are arguing again, and Allison looks frustrated as she tries to mediate. Klaus isn’t sure why she’s bothering. They’re at least a couple minutes from escalating to anything physical, and who knows, maybe they won’t even do that when Five is nearby all unconscious and everything. Vanya stays quiet, still holding onto Five’s hand, eyes darting between him and the argument.

Eventually, Allison bodily shoves her way between Digeo and Luther when they seem to be on the cusp of throwing punches (and/or knives). Klaus is a bit disappointed, because he hasn’t seen them fight in *years* and it makes him feel all nostalgic and stuff, but it’s probably for the best. They could totally wreck all the hospital machines in the room, and that would probably be bad for Five.

“Enough,” Allison says in a voice that isn’t loud but nonetheless has Klaus straightening up in obedience anyways. It’s probably some kind of Mom-power. “If you two can’t behave, you can wait outside. Five needs to rest, and *he is going to get it.*”

Luther and Diego look rebellious, but not enough to defy her. They settle down.

Silence falls. Klaus wonders whether he should make a joke. Propriety hasn’t ever stopped him before, but tensions are high and he doesn’t want to get on the wrong end of his brothers’ wrath.

A soft groan cuts through the air.

Everyone's heads *snap* towards Five, whose face is now scrunched up in - distress? Pain? Klaus isn't sure. He knows that he's never seen that look on Five's face before. It's - a little unsettling, actually.

Then Five's eyes blink open, and zero in on him.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I

AM

DONE.

I am *done.* This story is *complete.* I'm *finished.*

You may applaud now.

When Five sees Klaus, everything is okay.

It doesn't matter that his entire body feels like one big bruise, or that parts of him are numb in ways that mean he must be on anaesthetic. It doesn't matter that he can't quite remember what just happened, or how he got hurt. It doesn't matter that seeing him makes Five's heart *squeeze* in an unexpectedly painful way.

It doesn't matter, because Klaus is here, and that means everything is okay.

And then Klaus opens his mouth.

"Hey, sleeping beauty! We were just deciding on who'd have to play the part of the prince. Don't worry, I was in the lead, I wouldn't throw you on Diego's tender mercies."

Five blinks. "What -"

And then he looks around himself. At -

Luther, standing awkwardly near his head.

Diego, standing stiffly in the corner.

Allison, standing at the foot of his bed with a lopsided smile.

Vanya, sitting next to him and holding his hand in hers.

And -

Klaus.

Klaus, standing by the wall. Klaus, giving him a little finger wave, teeth glinting in the light. Klaus, with ill-fitting clothes and smudged makeup and dirty feet and track marks in his elbows and a familiar-unfamiliar expression, like Five is entirely new to him. Like nothing he's been for the past twenty-two years.

A stranger with his brother's face.

Klaus -

"Love you, Five."

- *no.*

"No," Five whispers.

"Five?" Vanya says, and any other time he'd focus on her and only her, his favorite sister, the one he sat with when they were children and listened to her play, the one who told him her secrets and looked to him for comfort just as he looked to her, the one person he could say he both loved and liked as a child.

Except -

"Five, what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

Except Klaus is gone.

Klaus is gone. His brother, his big brother, the one who raised him and protected him and loved him for the past twenty-two years. The one who saved him, over and over and over again, just because he wanted to, just because Five needed him to. The one who pored over medical textbooks full of jargon that made his head spin so that Five would never have to fear being injured. The one who pulled him from his workroom when the numbers swam in front of his eyes and refused to make sense. The one who promised not to leave, and Five believed him.

His brother is dead.

And Five helped kill him.

Five feels himself being moved to rest against a chest, but it's all wrong. He shoves them away because even blind he can tell it's not Klaus hugging him (he's never been hugged by anyone else). He falls back onto the bed, and it jars his wounds but he doesn't care, he doesn't *care.*

The equations. The equations he wrote and left and never thought twice about, not even when he found out The Commission was spying on them, not even when he wondered how they would move against them. The ones that, even half-finished, were more than enough for The Commission to figure out how to kill his brother, a man already dead.

Five is sobbing, he knows. He's sobbing, and crying, and saying *'no, no, no,'* like a small child. He doesn't care. It doesn't matter, nothing matters, not when Klaus is dead and Five

helped kill him.

“Love you, Five.”

It doesn’t *matter.*

****

Eventually, Five cries himself out.

Eventually, the tears stop coming. Not because there aren’t more of them, but because his siblings are looking at him with naked concern mixed with confusion, and it makes him feel - exposed. They don’t know why he’s grieving. They wouldn’t understand if he told them. Could never understand twenty-two years of survival and laughter and struggle and love.

Five wipes at his eyes with his hand. He looks at his siblings (not at Klaus, he can’t look at Klaus).

“Five,” Luther says, uncertainly, and can’t seem to think of what to say next.

“What happened?” Vanya whispers. Her hand reaches out, hovers between them. He doesn’t take it. “Five, what *happened* to you?”

He stares at her, blankly.

They discussed how to deal with their siblings, when they went back. Five wanted to keep them far away from any and all apocalyptic events or investigations, the image of their bodies forever fresh in his mind. Klaus was a bit more moderate, pointing out that they had connections and knowledge that might prove helpful. He did, however, admit that actually getting everyone to work together probably wasn’t feasible.

In the end, they’d agreed to play it by ear, and see just how everyone reacted to their appearance. It’s not like any concrete plans they made wouldn’t be upset. The Umbrella Academy rather excelled at that.

Five didn’t take into account that he and Klaus were both also part of the Academy, so even their initial first step of ‘coming back’ didn’t work out. He feels he really should have seen that coming.

“...I time travelled,” he says at last. It’s a deeply inadequate explanation, but it’s the most he can manage right now.

“We sorta figured,” Klaus pipes up, and Five has to work to keep himself from flinching. “But you can’t have been gone that long, right? You don’t look older.”

“I -what -” Five looks down at himself, and for the first time he notices the proportions of his body are all wrong. His limbs are shorter, eyeline is lower, skin is missing the lines of age. He reaches up to feel his chin, and instead of the faint hint of stubble he’s expecting it’s child-smooth. “What the fuck?” he says.

“Five?” Vanya says.

“I - I must have messed up the equations,” Five says, letting his hand drop. “It’s been twenty-two years, but the jump - I’m surprised I’m not dead, there was so little time to prepare. It’s no wonder I messed it up.”

Honestly, it’s almost expected at this point. God forbid Five ever do anything *right.*

“Wait, so you’re saying you’re thirty-five?” Luther demands incredulously.

“My *consciousness* is thirty-five,” Five corrects. “My *body* is thirteen again.”

“Ooo, is that why your arm is like that?” Klaus says, pointing.

“My -” Five blinks, and looks down at his missing arm. Oh, of course. It’s become such a normal part of himself that he forgot it would be fairly alarming to people who haven’t had sixteen years to get used to it. “Oh, that. Yeah. Lost it when I was nineteen.”

You amputated it, he doesn’t say. *It was horrible and messy and it hurt you maybe even more than it did me, but you did it, and you were perfect and didn’t make a single mistake and I never once doubted you. Not once, not ever.*

“But you’re thirteen again, shouldn’t it have….” Luther trails off.

Five sighs. “It’s - complicated. Math you wouldn’t understand.”

Klaus never did grasp more than the bare basics of time travel. Trying to explain it had taught Five some patience for people who weren’t as smart as him. Not *much* patience, but a bit.

“Okay, this is very interesting and all,” Diego says, lazily waving a knife, “But I think we should ask the important questions now. Five, who the fuck shot you, and are they going to follow you?”

Five is silent.

Where to begin? The apocalypse? The Commission? Klaus - no, he thinks as his heart gives a lurch. He can’t talk about Klaus.

Then there’s the fact that he’s not even sure they’ll believe him. Whenever they discussed it, they agreed that if they ended up telling their siblings everything, that part was always going to hinge on Klaus’ existence. If they didn’t believe in the apocalypse, they could at least believe Klaus was a ghost and they should prevent that from happening. If they didn’t believe in The Commission, they could at least believe Klaus was *terrifyingly* skilled with his powers and must have honed them somehow.

So much depended on Klaus (Five depended on Klaus).

“The Commission,” Five says, the words slipping out before he can stop them. He bites his tongue and silently curses at himself.

“The Commission?” Luther repeats.

“How *fantastically* informative,” Klaus says. Even when Five isn’t looking at him, he can tell that Klaus is 30% bored, 20% amused, and 50% jonesing. He’s not sure how much Klaus is taking in, but considering how absent his voice sounds he’s probably either high or coming down. It’s both jarring and strangely reassuring, because Five’s Klaus has been sober for over two decades and it’s a way to - differentiate them.

Not that his Klaus is here to be differentiated from.

“What did they do to you?” Vanya says.

Five blinks at her.

Vanya looks steadily back at him, with a centeredness to her Five has never seen before.

“They did something,” Vanya says. It’s not a question. “Five, you were *crying.* You’ve never cried over something as small as pain. What did they do to you?”

Five jerks his head away from her, breathing suddenly harsh.

“Five -” Allison says. She takes a step towards him.

“Don’t,” Five snaps. He grips the blanket tighter. “It’s not -” *important,* he tries to say, but he can’t. He can’t force the word out, he can’t fucking lie like that, not when it’s the most important thing in the world.

“- Relevant,” he manages. Even that much feels like a betrayal. He’s amassing quite a list.

Vanya frowns. “If they hurt you, it’s definitely relevant.”

“No,” And Five shudders at that, but - he has to focus on the apocalypse. It’s the only thing he *can* do. Klaus would - he would understand. “It’s over and done with. We need to focus on other matters.”

“Like?” Klaus wonders.

“Like -” Five hesitates. “What’s the date? The exact date?”

“March 24th,” Luther says.

“The year of our Lord two thousand and nineteen,” Klaus adds helpfully. “Well, not *my* Lord. I’ve been told He doesn’t like me, which is fair, although I’m waiting to hear it directly from Him before I make any commitments.”

“Oh,” Five breathes, trying to block out the rush of pain at hearing such familiar babble. “That’s - so I missed the funeral, then.”

“How did you know about that?” Luther says, startled.

“What part of ‘time-travel’ do you not understand?” Five shoots back. He reaches up to pinch the bridge of his nose. Eight days. He has eight days to stop the apocalypse, and he has no idea how. His only clue -

Five’s eyes snap open, and he straightens up. “Where’s the eye?”

“Eye?” Allison frowns.

“I had a prosthetic eye with me, where is it?” Five demands. Panic rises in his gut. He’s memorized every detail of the eye, of course, but he’s kept it safe for twenty-two years now, he *can’t* lose it so close to the endgame (but why not, he’s already lost his brother, how very fucking careless of him -)

“This?” Luther asks, and he hands over the pouch. Five clutches at it like a lifeline and tries to ignore the memory of pulling it from Luther’s fingers the first time. “It was in your pocket. There’s an eyeball in there? Is it important?”

“Yes,” Five swallows. The pouch makes a slight crinkling sound under his grip, but he shoves away thoughts of the other items inside. He can’t think about those, can’t think about Klaus’ face whenever he came back with some random trinket to gift to Five, can’t think about how he’s holding the only evidence his older brother ever existed at all. “Very important.”

“It has to do with these Commission people?” Diego asks.

“Tangentially,” Five weighs his words. He….doesn’t think he can convince them of the impending apocalypse. Not with his current evidence (precisely: nil). He’ll have to be more abstract in his explanation.

“Eight days from now,” he says carefully. “Something will happen. I’m not sure exactly what, but it’s - bad. A lot of people die.” *You die.* “I’m trying to prevent that. The Commission disapproves, and attempted to stop” *us* “me. This eye,” Five holds it up, “is the only clue I have.”

Klaus gasps in delight. “A *murder mystery?* Oh, Fivey, you *shouldn’t* have.”

Diego snaps at Klaus to shut up, which provides a convenient reason for Five to not answer that isn’t his lungs seizing up at hearing that stupid fucking nickname. Five forces himself to breathe, and it consumes most of his attention for the next minute or so, which means he only hears the tail end of Allison’s question.

“What?” he says.

She hesitates. “How widespread is it? Do you - was LA hit? Did Claire survive?”

No. “I don’t know,” Five says, hoping his poker face is good enough to pass muster.

Allison bites her lip and doesn’t call him out on it, so he assumes he succeeded.

“So we’ll stop it,” Luther says, a light kindling in his eyes. Five remembers that light well, saw it every time they went on a mission. Luther always was the most devoted of them. “I

can pull -"

"*I* am going to stop it," Five snaps. Even two decades later, their bodies are fresh in his mind, tattered cloth on metal poles, Klaus breaking apart in a mess of silver-blue - "I don't require assistance."

"Not that I really want to convince you otherwise, because this little mission of yours sounds like a lot of work," Klaus says, head lolling against the wall. "But didn't you just get shot a couple times? I didn't hallucinate that, right?"

"Shockingly, Klaus is right," Diego says, and Five wonders how he would react to the entire laundry list of all the times Klaus was right in the past twenty-two years. It honestly got deeply annoying at times. "Five, there's no way we're letting you do this alone."

The word feels like a punch to the gut. *Alone.*

Five is in a room with every single one of his siblings, and he feels more alone than he has since the first six months of the apocalypse.

"No," he says, baring his teeth. "Informing you was just a courtesy." He shouldn't have done it. What was he thinking? Where was his brain?

"Love you, Five."

He almost doesn't notice Vanya's hand reaching out to him. "Five," she says softly. "We just want to help."

"I don't want or *need* your help," he hisses, bile rising in his throat. He jerks back from her hand, and ignores the flash of hurt that crosses her face. Doesn't she see? Trying to help would just get them killed, just like the first time around, just like Klaus, he'd only get them killed -

There's talking, words flying between everyone, arguing with him and protesting his declaration, but he can't hear them. The room is spinning, air muggy and thick, lights far too bright. Five's chest is too tight, he can't breathe.

Klaus is talking. Klaus is here, why isn't he doing anything? Whenever Five has a panic attack Klaus always pulls him in close until he can breathe again, tells him to follow the rhythm of the chest he's pressed up against, heavy exaggerated breaths until Five can match them. Then they sit for a while, Klaus humming a vague melody, until Five feels like he can stand again.

That's not happening. He can hear Klaus, but he's not helping Five, why -

"Love you, Five."

- light -

Five gasps for air, and before he can think he's pulling on the meagre energy inside of himself and he *jumps.*

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> I am now up to chapter 22 of 'it comes and goes'! Plus, tomorrow I will be posting my very first omake! Stay tuned!

"Fuck!" Klaus swears loudly as Five disappears.

"He couldn't have gone far," Diego says, "He can barely stand. He's probably still in the house. Everyone spread out and look."

Seeing as how Five just recently jumped through *time* when he wasn't able to stand, Klaus feels Diego is kind of underestimating their babyfaced older brother. However, everyone is already rushing out of the infirmary before he can share this observation.

"Right," he says to the empty room. Even Ben is gone. "Because chasing the teleporter is going to work out."

He sighs, and follows them anyways, because fuck if he's not going to join in. The last time Five ran off, they didn't see him for seventeen years. Klaus kind of doubts they could have caught him then, either, but he knows it weighs on all of them that none of them even tried.

Klaus is an expert on hauntings, he knows it when he sees it. And they've all been haunted by that fact for seventeen years.

Searching through the house is an adventure, especially when he hasn't been here in over a decade and they weren't actually allowed in quite a few parts of it in the first place. Predictably, most of the rooms are monuments to dear old Daddy's colossal ego. Creepy mounted animal heads (and that's saying something, coming from *him*), pristine vintage furniture that looks like it'll collapse if looked at wrong (no dice, sadly), pretentious artwork (several of them depicting Guess Who), stupidly expensive old knicknacks scattered everywhere (he's doing the place a favor by cleaning up, really, they'll look much nicer in the pawn shop a few streets over).

Honestly, it's a miracle they were afforded as much space as they were. Out of a vague sense of nostalgia, Klaus pokes his head into his own room -

- and gets the shock of his life when he sees Five curled up on the floor. Crying.

"What," Klaus says.

Five's head jerks up at his voice. When Five sees him, his brother's face goes through an - *interesting* series of emotions, before landing on a blank mask.

“K-” Five says, before clearing his throat. “Klaus.” He scrubs at his eyes.

“Uh,” Klaus says eloquently. “Hey? Why are you in my room?”

Five remains still for several seconds. “I jumped at random,” he says at last. “Landed here. I don’t have enough energy to jump again.”

There’s something - *off* about that explanation. Klaus has a fairly good nose for bullshit (you don’t survive as long as he has in the places he’s been otherwise), and Five isn’t telling the truth. Or at least not the whole truth.

Klaus can’t think of why Five would be lying, though. Because seriously, why would he teleport into Klaus’ childhood bedroom on *purpose?*

“....Right,” he says uncertainly. “So, you freaked everyone out with your little disappearing stunt, and they’re all turning the house upside-down looking for you. You’d think they’d have more faith, but you’re still kind of shot and all so I guess it’s warranted. How did that happen, again?”

“I told you,” Five said. “The Commission -”

“Yeah,” Klaus interrupts. “You did. But the thing is that Vanya was totally right about the whole thing with you crying. And here you are again, crying - you’d better not wipe your nose on my blankets, by the way - so I’m *inclined* to think that’s how you got shot. You can fucking teleport, you don’t *get* shot. So what happened?”

Five doesn’t answer.

Klaus throws his hands up. “Fine, be that way, see if I try to play sympathetic ear again. I’ll go tell everyone you’ve been found, although now that I think about it they probably won’t believe me when I say you’re in my room. So don’t go anywhere, I need you for proof.”

He’s halfway out the door when Five says, “Like they don’t believe you about Ben?”

Klaus freezes.

He’s tried telling his siblings about Ben a couple times. Not often. Once at the funeral, once a while after, once before he left the house and once a little over eight years ago. Four (hah) times in total.

They never believed him, of course. He barely even remembers the funeral one, but Ben tells him that he basically tanked his credibility and is lucky he didn’t get anything broken. Klaus can understand that, sort of. *He’s* not too fond of himself, really, it’s no wonder his siblings got fed up with him.

The second time….the second time might have hurt the most. He made sure he wasn’t (visibly) high, and even extracted a few stories from Ben that he couldn’t have gotten any other way (it’s also how he learned Vanya dabbled in writing, which he thought was cool at the time). They still dismissed him, didn’t even stick around to hear the proof. He got absolutely shitfaced after that one, and Ben didn’t even protest.

The third time, it was more of a last-ditch effort than anything. He's still not sure if he really didn't expect it to work, or just told himself that. Anyways, it was the last thing that tied him to the Academy, and once his siblings disbelieved him he left with a clear conscience.

The fourth time, he wasn't expecting it to work in the least. In fact, that was the whole point. Diego was so pissed at him he didn't wait around to see if Klaus actually went into rehab, and he got to skip out on the whole thing. Ben glared at him a lot for that one, but fuck it, he wasn't the one looking at a month of withdrawal after having his stash confiscated.

Klaus gave up on his family believing him about Ben years ago. It's never going to happen, and he's accepted that. He has.

Staring out into the hallway, Klaus asks quietly, "How do you know about that?"

"....I went to the future," Five says, equally quiet. "Read Vanya's book."

"Ah," Klaus says, a little distantly. "Of course. Sorry you couldn't hear about Ben in person, that must've been rough."

Five is silent. Again. Klaus doesn't remember him being this quiet, it's weird. But it's not even in the top five (hah!) weirdest things that have happened today, so Klaus doesn't bother thinking about it much.

Instead he keeps talking, injecting a note of cheer into his voice. "And sorry you couldn't see my little breakdown, I'm told it was quite spectacular. Don't remember much myself, but I don't think The Book does it justice."

"Klaus -" Five says.

Klaus interrupts, which he knows Five hates (hated? He can't see that changing about Five, though), but he can't face another round of how-dare-you-pretend-you-can-talk-to-Ben-what-the-fuck-is-wrong-with-you accusations. He speaks quickly, hoping to talk over whatever Five tries to say. "I wasn't so much a fan of the part where she was envious of us getting our tattoos, I think she missed how we were all crying and traumatized and shit. And I barely recognized you, Five, Book-you was way nicer than you-you, or maybe it's just that you were only nice to Vanya."

"Klaus -"

"I did like the part where she pointed out Dad was a terrible person, though, that took some real guts. Do you think Dad ever read it? I can't imagine he would, he hated us but she got it right that he just actively pretended she didn't exist. Reading her dissing him would have been such a shock, though. I wonder if it caused his heart attack, that would be fucking sweet. And hey, she wanted to be more like us, she can't get powers but at least she wouldn't be the only one without a bodycount."

"You don't have a bodycount either," Five says.

"Yeah, but -"

Klaus blinks.

He turns around.

“How do you know that?” he says.

Five goes still.

“I never -” Klaus frowns. “No one knows about that.” No one alive, anyways. Ben knows, but he figured it out over time. Klaus’ worst fear (well, one of many) is acquiring a ghost as persistently present as Ben but not nearly as benign, and as a consequence he’s neglected to get himself out of a few situations where violence would solve things. Ben - isn’t exactly happy about Klaus staying in those situations, but he’s accepted it.

Dad might have known, as well, but honestly Dad was so disappointed in him Klaus stopped keeping track of all the reasons why a long time ago.

“I - figured it out,” Five says. “I don’t remember you killing anyone, and I deduced you didn’t want a retinue of ghosts following you around. It wasn’t hard.”

Klaus frowns harder at his brother. His bullshit-meter is going off, but he can’t think of what the truth might be, or why Five would be covering it up. And...it’s not like Five’s logic is *wrong,* per se. Anyone could figure it out, and Five always was the smart one.

That tiny, bitter part of himself that’s been there for the past seventeen years or so points out that Five clearly didn’t care about how his *own* retinue would affect his brother who can see the dead. Klaus tries to ignore it, but it’s harder than usual. Five is *admitting* that he knew Klaus hated seeing the dead, and he didn’t even care that just being in the same house was hurting his brother.

“Right,” Klaus says. He sounds very distant, he realizes. “I’m going to go get the others. You stay here.”

Five blinks and straightens up. “Klaus, wait -”

Klaus waves vaguely to him. “Oh come on, don’t be stingy, Five. Your little sobfest is over, and I think if Luther gets more worried than he already is he’ll start pulling down walls. That would be terrible, Pogo and Mom still live here, you know.”

“I didn’t -”

Klaus saunters out into the hallway instead of hearing the rest of Five’s protestations. He tries to distract himself by wondering what he’ll have for lunch. He has *options* now, for as long as he can stand remaining in the Academy, he’s going to milk that for all it’s worth - ooo, *milk*….

Then Five appears in front of him, with a frustrated look on his face. “Klaus, will you -”

But he doesn’t get to finish the sentence before he staggers and nearly falls over. Klaus darts forward and grabs him before he can remember how much Five hates being touched.

Sure enough, Five goes rigid. Klaus carefully doesn't wince, because god, there have been some times where *he* didn't want to be touched and people did it anyways, and the thought of Five feeling the same way is - not great. Five isn't even breathing, and Klaus doesn't do more than make sure he's steady before letting him go.

"....You okay?" Klaus says, before berating himself. Five always hated being asked that, because it implied that he had human limits that could be exhausted like anyone else.

Five doesn't answer, staring off into space. His arm comes up to hover over the spot where Klaus held onto him. Which isn't concerning at *all.*

Klaus loiters uncertainly, before looking awkwardly to the side. "Uh," he says. "I'll just - go find the others, then." Maybe Vanya could help. She was the Five-whisperer when they were younger, it probably still translated even after all this time.

He starts off down the hall, and then he hears a quiet "Klaus."

He turns around. Five is looking at him, except for some reason Klaus gets the feeling he's not really *seeing* him. It's a little creepy.

"....Nice dress," Five says at last. His voice sounds….weird. It's probably not what he wanted to say, and Klaus finds himself torn between feeling grateful and confused about that.

"Oh," Klaus looks down at himself. Allison's skirt swishes around his legs. *"Danke."*

Five jerks his head around to look away, and takes a deep breath. He walks off.

Klaus stands in the hallway, blinking after him.

….Yeah, he has *no* idea what's going on.

****

Ben finds him again after a bit.

"He's over by the dining room," Ben tells him. "Diego's cornered him, but I think he's going to try to jump away soon."

"It's just like old times," Klaus says brightly, and meanders over to watch the fireworks.

He can hear the raised voices from a ways away - oh, wait, no, those are ghosts. Klaus pats his pockets and sighs. He got a good price for that box, and there are a few leftover pills, but he has a feeling Ben would object to popping a few more.

Ben notices his movements and says, "Really?" in Disapproving Voice #7. "Five just got back."

"All the more reason to celebrate, *mein bruder!" Klaus says, throwing up his hands and spinning around. "I liberated a few more things from around here, I'm thinking we pop over to the pawn shop after this."*

"*I'm* thinking you should focus on taking care of Five," Ben says. Klaus makes a face at him.

"But *Beeeen,*" he whines. He can do a very good whine, and Ben scowls in that way that means it's drilling into his ghostly skull like a mosquito-powered drill. "I am literally the least-qualified person on the planet to take care of Five, there are plenty of our siblings tripping over themselves to do that. He'd probably murder me if I tried, too, and you're always on me about that whole 'self-preservation' thing. Aren't you proud of me?"

"What's there to be proud of?" Ben says flatly as they enter the dining room. Which would probably hurt if Klaus wasn't used to hearing that and worse, so he just sticks his tongue out before focusing on the scene in front of them.

Five is bristling, which is charmingly familiar. Diego is also bristling, which is less charming but equally familiar. At some point Vanya found them, and is now vacillating between looking anxious and making vague attempts to keep the peace. She's not very successful at the latter, but she could win gold medals in the former.

"You had surgery *two hours* ago!" Diego snaps.

"I've had worse," Five shoots back. He's in his Academy uniform, which looks hilarious now with over a decade of hindsight. "It's not like I'm backpacking across Europe, it's literally just getting coffee, an entire city block and there isn't a single can in the house -"

"You shouldn't even be up, you need to let your body *heal,*" Diego says. It's probably the wrong thing to say, because Five levels an absolutely vicious glare at him.

"Oh, of course," Five says, sarcasm so thick Klaus is surprised he doesn't choke on it. "I'll just lie in bed and forget all about the a-cataclysm bearing down on us. It'll probably just avert *itself.*"

"We should all calm down," Vanya says, and it would probably sound more convincing if she wasn't shrinking in on herself and could say it without the words wavering.

"*You* don't get to talk," Diego turns to her. "You made it pretty clear you never considered yourself part of this family, so you don't get a say in how we work."

"Wait, are we disowning people now?" Klaus says. "Because if we are, I really think Dad should be first. And I've never particularly liked Luther."

Five twitches. *"Shut up."*

There's an undercurrent to Five's voice that Klaus can't identify, and being around someone without knowing what they think of you is fairly dangerous, in Klaus' experience. He shuts up.

Five pinches the bridge of his nose. "Vanya," he says eventually. "You should go home."

"What?" she says. "But -"

“Go *home,* Vanya,” Five says again, and while he’s not particularly gentle about it it’s the softest he’s been with anyone so far, except for when he commented on Klaus’ skirt (maybe. He’s still confused about that).

Vanya flinches like Five yelled at her, though, and gets even smaller somehow. Klaus didn’t know that was possible. She hesitates, and then heads out of the room without protesting. Five looks like he might have an inkling of an inclination to apologize as she leaves, but as his gaze follows her it flickers across Klaus, whereupon that blank mask slides back again. Klaus figures he must have imagined it. He doubts even twenty-two years has made Five capable of apologizing.

Five turns back to Diego. “I’m getting coffee,” he says, with no room for argument. “I would *love* to see you try and stop me.”

Diego growls. *“Fine,”* he bites out. “I’m driving you, though. If you collapse again, someone has to take you home.”

“Whatever,” Five says. “Griddy’s is still open, right?”

“Of course,” Diego’s eyes flick to Klaus. “Don’t get high while we’re gone.”

Klaus puts a hand to his chest. *“Moi?”*

Five ignores him as they brush by. Once they’re out of the room, Klaus looks over at Ben.

“What’d I tell you?” He spreads out his arms. “Just like old times.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> You guys, go check out my omake (ch 23 of 'it comes & goes'), it is an apology for all the *relentless depressingness* I've been dropping on you so far.

Leaving the Academy is - not a relief. Five very much doubts he'll be capable of positive emotions for a good long while. But it becomes marginally easier to breathe.

Being around Klaus is - he can't be around Klaus. He can't, because he'll either break down again or *attack* Klaus because he's *wrong*, all wrong, the way he moves and speaks and acts is close but not *his* Klaus. It's like looking at his brother in a broken mirror, all the angles not quite fitting together like they should.

The car ride is silent, and maybe some people would describe the city as such, too, but Five knows what true silence is like. It's fairly subdued, at least.

Diego tries to initiate conversation once, but Five shuts that down quickly. He doesn't want to talk. He barely wants to see his siblings. It's been so, so long, and he knows some things about them, but however much he loves them (he'll always love them, he doesn't know how to stop) they're essentially strangers. He doesn't want to be reminded of that.

Five stares out the window into the darkness, and tries not to think of silver-blue light.

They arrive at Griddy's soon enough. There's no one inside, which suits Five just fine.

"You coming in?" Five asks Diego, opening the car door.

"You staying long?"

"Nah." He just needs some fucking coffee.

"I'll stay outside, then." Diego fiddles with the car radio, which looks suspiciously like it's been kludged together with a police scanner.

Five ignores what is probably the mechanism that enables Diego's vigilante activities and gets out of the car. He breathes through his nose at the sharp protestations from his torso at the maneuvering. He's had worse.

Right after he rings the service bell, a man enters the diner. He comes and sits by Five. The man briefly looks him over, and there's the almost-familiar-by-now double take at his arm. Five doesn't pay him any mind besides absently assessing him for weapons and probable

takedown methods. He judges the man's threat level to be negligible, even in his current condition, and otherwise ignores him.

The waitress comes out from the back. Come to think of it, that was probably her body he'd found, the first time he visited. The hair looked about right, and - yes, 'Agnes', that was her.

"Sorry, sink was clogged," she said, smiling warmly. "So, what'll it be?"

"Ah, give me a chocolate eclair," the man says.

"Sure," Agnes says. She glances at Five, and her smile falters at the space where his arm should be. To her credit, she recovers quickly, and continues speaking. "Can I get you something, hun?"

Five has never been called 'hun' in his life. Well - maybe as a joke by Klaus, riding off the Situation They Do Not Speak Of, but Five has almost (had almost) trained him out of that via careful application of threats.

He's probably going to get a lot more 'hun's from now on, he realizes with resignation. He looks like a child - a disabled child. This may be more difficult than he thought.

"Coffee. Black." He says, not even attempting a smile.

Agnes falters again, and glances at the man. "Cute kid," she says to him. The man looks slightly confused. Having gone undercover with Klaus several times over the years (ironically, it was 50/50 whether anyone believed them when they said they were brothers, the whole 'not genetically related' thing can be a pain to work around sometimes), Five can only hope the man doesn't blow the inadvertent cover story Agnes has just cooked up. Attracting attention would be bad at this juncture, and a disabled kid on his own is far more suspicious than one with an apparent guardian.

Maybe he should have brought Diego in with him, but honestly Diego would probably fail period stealth and this is his *own damn time.* Five has no idea who lets him walk around with that harness, and he would like to know their name so he can shoot them.

The man doesn't say anything, though, and Five tries for a smile to sell it. Judging by the look on Agnes' face, he fails miserably. He stops. He doesn't really feel like smiling, anyways.

Thankfully, Agnes goes back to prepare their things without further comment. Five and the man sit in silence.

Five takes a breath and looks around at the diner. Old memories flash through his mind - sneaking out with his siblings, nervous giggles muffled behind their hands. Looking back, he realizes that Pogo must have known, because he was the one in charge of the nighttime surveillance footage and no matter what they thought they couldn't have avoided *all* the cameras. But at the time, they were drunk on their own cleverness, at subverting just a bit of their father's control. Even Luther got a thrill from it.

The diner was easy enough to find in the apocalypse, of course. It was Klaus who mentioned it, one day a year or so after his appearance. He spoke of it fondly, but those memories had faded over seventeen years, and he felt no particular attachment to the place.

Five was different. At the time, he'd been eighteen months from finding his siblings dead in a pile of rubble, eighteen months from actually *going* to the diner with them, a few weeks before he left. The memories were strong, even stronger with how often he played them over and over in his head, terrified of forgetting details and seeing his siblings' faces fade into blurry smudges.

Going to the diner didn't magically make those memories leap back into crystal-clear focus, of course. When he visited the ruins, it was nothing more and nothing less than a shattered building filled with moldy donuts, broken furniture, and rotting bodies. His siblings' faces blurred away regardless.

He does like to think it made them last longer, though. Just for a while. There's no evidence for it, but he's learned a little bit about faith, these past couple decades.

Agnes brings their things over. Five sips at his coffee. It's been - less than a day since he had coffee, he realizes. He had some a couple hours before Lacquer arrived at the hotel.

It seems like so much longer.

Five barely hears it when the man says, "I'll get his." He looks up.

"Thanks," Five says. He's proud of himself for the way his voice doesn't catch on the emotion clogging his throat.

Then he sees the patch on the man's vest.

It's stupid. It's unnecessary. It's pointless and distracting and oh god it would be so fucking painful, how can he *tell* her.

But his eyes can't seem to tear themselves away from the man's vest.

"You -" and Five can't quite prevent his voice from stumbling this time, but he rights himself well enough. "You must know your way around the city."

The man looks up from his eclair. "Hope so," he says. "Been driving it for twenty years."

'Yeah, but could you recognize it after an apocalypse?' Five doesn't say, because now is not the time to be comparing people to Klaus.

"Good," he says, a little distantly. He leans forward. "I need an address."

He gets it.

It's just in case, Five tells himself. Just in case he finds himself buckling under the weight of the world (he's never had to carry it alone before, doesn't know how he'll stand up). Just in case he finds he can't handle the grief that surges through him at random, sharper than any

mere gunshot wound. Just in case he can figure out the words to tell Delores that he helped murder Klaus.

The man leaves. Five puts the address in his pocket. He picks up his coffee to take another sip.

Then he notices the reflection in the service bell, and puts it down again.

Five takes a deep breath.

The tracker. Of course. He can't believe he forgot about the tracker. He glances at his arm and okay, in his defense, the tiny scar from it's insertion has been wiped away, so it's not like he had any reminders. But he shouldn't have needed any. They always planned for the tracker. It was never going to be an obstacle, one quick surgery and it would be out. Klaus estimated it would take forty seconds, tops.

Klaus isn't here, though, and Five should have realized what that meant.

There's the clicking of guns, and….huh, none of them are wearing helmets. In fact, they aren't at all attired properly to take on someone of his caliber. One of the men - presumably the leader - steps forward.

Do they know he's injured? Is that why they have substandard armor? It's still an inexcusable oversight. Five takes a steady breath.

He wants to check if Diego has noticed anything amiss yet, but he can't give away his brother's position. He needs to buy time. Normally, he could easily take out this many people. Normally, none of this would pose a threat to him. Normally, he isn't running on fumes with two fresh bullet holes in him.

"That was fast," Five says levelly. "Thought I'd have more time before they found me."

But time is the one thing they have in abundance in The Commission, isn't it? They have all the time they need. He just has eight days.

"Okay," the leader says. "So let's all be professional about this, yeah? On your feet, and come with us. They want to talk."

Five is caught off-guard by the icy flood of *rage* that engulfs him upon hearing that. He takes in a long, shaky breath. When he places his hand on the countertop, however, it's perfectly steady. Perfectly still.

"Talk," Five says. He feels almost like he's removed from his body, watching himself from very far away. His face is completely blank. There is no emotion in his voice. "They want to talk."

"That's all," The leader says. "Will you come quietly?"

Five observes a supernova exploding inside of himself, but it's all from such a distance that he can only note that he must be feeling more intensely than he's ever felt before. So much

that it doesn't feel like anything at all, really.

"They murdered" *my lifeline, my best friend, my big brother, the only person who ever said they love me, the only person I ever believed* "my partner. And now they want. To **talk.**"

The leader barely pauses, even though from the corner of his eye Five sees one of the men stumbling away from the look on his face. "It doesn't have to go this way," he says warningly. "You think I want to shoot a kid? Go home with that on my conscience?"

The fact that anyone working for The Commission considers themselves in possession of a conscience would be funny under any other circumstances. Five turns to look at the man. His hand reaches unobtrusively for the butter knife laid out nearby.

"I couldn't care less what you want," Five informs him. *"I want my brother back."*

Then he *jumps.*

He's had some time to recover, so it's not as painful this time. Even so, as he stabs the knife into the leader's neck, he knows he only has a couple more jumps in him, max. He uses one to jump away as the leader's body falls to the floor, bullets spraying out of his gun.

At least *that* should alert Diego, if nothing else has.

Five's jump lands him behind the counter he just sat at. It should be unexpected, and it sounds like at least one soldier was wounded by the leader's dying misfire. A stroke of luck has the lights flickering madly, also hit, and the diner is bathed in an erratic strobe-light effect. The men cry out to each other in barely-suppressed panic. What kind of goons are these?

They still have quite a lot of guns, though, and he needs to act before they regain their balance. Gritting his teeth, Five jumps again.

He lands near a soldier, and only the man's start of surprise gives him enough time to recover. The sharp pain in his gut, radiating from his gunshot wound, gets stronger. He's probably opened it up again.

That's not important, though, and Five forces himself to move. He grabs the nearest thing, which happens to be a pen, and jams it into the man's neck. Another soldier notices him, but Five catches the dead man's gun and is spraying bullets before he can get a warning out.

Gun barrels - ones that haven't gone down - swerve in his direction, and Five jumps once more. Black spots appear in his vision when he lands, and he lets out an inadvertent gasp that alerts the man he's landed behind.

The man spins around, eyes wide and terrified, and the gun in his hands pulls up. The chaos in the diner is enough that Five could conceivably get away if he took care of this one man, but his body refuses to follow his instructions, and he can only stagger.

The man points the gun -

- and a knife sprouts in his neck like a particularly speedy flower. The man drops.

Five can't help but grin at that. There's no real happiness in it, but there is a dark, vicious satisfaction, and it's a decent enough substitute.

More knives are flung, and unlike the bullets flying through the air these find their targets every time. The men are disorganized and terrified and way out of their depth, and Diego has been specifically trained to throw as many knives in as short a time as possible. It's over in less than ten seconds.

There is blessed silence.

"You took your time," Five breathes out, leaning back against the wall. This time, he *knows* he's started bleeding again. Definitely from his gut, probably from his shoulder.

"Fuck," Five blinks, and Diego is there in front of him. He frowns. Diego can't teleport, how did he do that? "Five? Five, stay awake for me, okay?"

Klaus said that once, he remembers. The memory is fragmented, but it was when he got on the wrong side of a building (the underside, Klaus joked with strained cheer) and his injuries meant they eventually had to amputate his arm. He remembers Klaus begged him to stay awake.

"Okay," Five says. He blinks heavily. "Okay." Then he remembers. "Tracker."

"What?" Diego says.

"Tracker," Five says. It's getting hard to enunciate, for some reason. "In my arm. How they found me."

Diego looks down at Five's arm with an expression of horror. *"Fuck."*

One of the men groans on the floor. There's a spreading puddle of blood underneath him, so it's not like he's much of a threat, but Five frowns at him anyways. He tries to indicate him to Diego. It's just sloppy to leave survivors, and Five has no compunction about killing *these* people. He's just sorry he couldn't make it slower.

Diego nods - or, that's what it looks like. Things are getting a little blurry. "Okay, okay, I got it," he soothes. "Just stay awake, Five. Can you do that?"

Five nods, but the movement sends the world spinning. He slides down the wall, Diego still holding onto him.

Klaus - where's Klaus, Five needs medical attention, Klaus will know what to do, he's the only doctor who can help. He opens his mouth to ask, but there's something he's forgetting. Something important, something about Klaus, he should know it, it's blindingly obvious, what can't he *remember* -

The scent of blood clogs his nostrils, and Five remembers what it was. Oh, of course. They're in the field. He can't call Klaus by his name when they're in the field.

“Raithe,” he croaks out. He blinks up at Diego. “Where’s Raithe?”

Then he falls into blackness.

Chapter 5

Klaus is *just* about to pop some pills when the front door is thrown open.

Even in the living room it's audible, the door crashing against the wall. Klaus barely has time to wonder what's going on before he hears Diego bellowing out "MOM!"

Klaus falls off the couch. Ben straightens up, broken out of his futile attempt to convince Klaus not to take the pills (he was arguing more out of habit than anything, really). They swap glances, before hurrying out into the main hall.

"Oh fuck," Klaus says, nearly in stereo with Ben, when he sees the small body clutched in Diego's arms.

"He needs Mom," Diego says shortly, which, no duh. "I wrapped up his wounds, but I don't know if there's internal bleeding."

"What the fuck," Klaus says. "Diego, you had one job!"

"We were ambushed," Diego snaps. "Five says there's a tracker in his arm, we need to get it out."

"A *what,*" Klaus says, but Diego is already rushing past him to the infirmary. Klaus is left blinking in the hall.

"A tracker," Ben says, staring after their brothers. "Well, that would have been nice to know."

Klaus laughs, sharp and high. "No shit," he says, and follows them to the infirmary.

Pogo is there before him this time, which is good. At least someone is on top of things in this house. He's cutting off Five's uniform and directing Diego to pull out more gauze and medical supplies and just being generally doctor-like, so Klaus hangs back out of the way.

Five looks just as pale as he did after he fell out of the portal-thing. Actually, Klaus is getting some major deja-vu right now, which isn't precisely a new sensation for him (drugs: they fuck you up! who knew?), but in this case it's less because his memory isn't the greatest and more because apparently none of his siblings are any more competent than him. That's a terrifying realization.

"So," Klaus says to Ben, watching Diego and Pogo scurry around the room. "Since Five apparently neglected to mention he has a tracker on him, what do you want to bet he's not telling us other things?"

"Why would you think that?" Ben says, frowning and glancing over at him.

Klaus thinks about the half-truths Five told him in his bedroom, the blank mask that slides over his face when they ask about whatever those Commission people did to him. Klaus

knows all about pretending, and even if his own mask is a little more colorful than Five's he can tell when it's covering up some truly nasty shit.

"Just a hunch," he says.

Ben looks at him - they've been together long enough for him to know when Klaus is being evasive - but doesn't push further. That's why Ben is his favorite. Well, sometimes Diego is his favorite, which just so happens to often coincide with Diego's wallet mysteriously going missing, but if Ben had any money to steal he would definitely never lose his place as Klaus' favorite.

Ben was distinctly underwhelmed when Klaus shared this with him, once. Klaus feels that Ben doesn't appreciate the honor he has been given. Typical Hargreeves-style ungratefulness, right there.

"We should get Luther and Allison," Ben says.

"What?" Klaus turns to him in surprise. "Why? Isn't this little party terrible enough already?"

"If Five has a tracker in him, there could be more people coming," Ben persists. "We'll need them to keep guard while Five is being stitched up."

Fuck, he hates when Ben makes sense like that. It's way too common, and it's not like Klaus can do his usual thing and ignore his brother, because this time it's not about him.

Ben looks triumphant, the asshole. He knows he's won. Klaus groans.

Klaus drags his feet all the way to Luther and Allison's rooms. The house is quiet - or, it would be, if Klaus had managed to take those pills earlier. As it is, he can't quite see full ghosts - he's not *sober* - but there are constant flickers in the corners of his vision and persistent screams and murmuring creeping into his hearing.

He doesn't wonder what real silence sounds like. He stopped wondering years, decades ago. He *did.*

"Luther!" Klaus shouts, banging the heels of his hands on his siblings' doors. "Allison! We have a situation here!"

There might be faint noises from inside the rooms, but Klaus honestly can't tell if they're from his siblings or not. He looks at Ben pleadingly.

Ben sticks his head through the doors and comes back out. "They're getting up," he says, just as Luther's door swings open.

Oh, dear. Luther looks irritated. Klaus takes a couple steps back, just in case. Then he beams at his brother, just because. "Luther! Fantastic to see you, hope I wasn't interrupting anything."

"Klaus," Luther growls, and wow, really feeling the love here. "There better be a *damn* good reason for this."

Allison opens her door, rubbing sleep out of her eyes. “Klaus, what….”

Klaus claps, and Luther and Allison both startle. He should wake people up in the middle of the night more often, this is hilarious. There’s a moderate chance he’ll get snapped in half and/or gain a few new holes, of course, but he judges the risk worth the reward.

“Okay!” he says brightly, because he really should get around to the point. “Five is unconscious again and Diego says it’s because they were ambushed by more of those people who object to time-travelling teenagers, and Diego says *Five* said that he has a tracker in that sad single arm of his, so they’re getting that out now. But we should still set up a guard around him, and I volunteered you! Aren’t you special!”

His siblings need a few seconds to process that. Which, rude, he was perfectly clear.

“Five was attacked again?” Allison says with alarm.

“He has a *tracker* in him?” Luther asks.

“Yes and yes,” Klaus says. “So, if we could -” But neither of them are listening as they hurry past him. “- well, alright then.”

The infirmary is crowded once he gets back to it. There’s that deja vu again, even stronger this time. The fleeting thought crosses his mind that someone should call Vanya, but he gets distracted by Luther and Diego arguing. Again.

“- didn’t think they’d catch up *this* fast!” Diego growls at Luther, bristling pointily. “It’s not like Five saw fit to tell anyone he’s bugged!”

“But you still took him out *knowing* there are people after him -” Luther shoots back, looming.

“If you have some way to make Five do something he doesn’t want to do, I’m *all* ears!” Diego throws up his hands.

Klaus is kind of on Diego’s side here. Luther hadn’t been happy when he told him about Diego and Five leaving, but it’s not like any of them could ever get Five to change his mind when he was set on something. Well, sometimes Vanya, but only sometimes.

And besides, their brother is still alive. Klaus peeks over to check, and yes, Five’s face is alarmingly pale and there’s a probably unhealthy amount of blood, but he’s breathing steadily and it doesn’t seem to be in any danger of changing. That’s worse than four hours ago but a vast improvement on fourteen hours ago, when they hadn’t even known if he was alive or not.

There’s some more arguing that Klaus tunes out, watching Pogo work on Five. Klaus is not in any way, shape or form squeamish about blood or injuries, although it is a little difficult to see it on his brother. As far as Klaus’ (very limited) medical knowledge goes, however, things don’t look too bad.

You know. Comparatively.

Allison utilizes her Mom-power again, and the argument is quelled. Diego and Luther shoot each other one last glare again, before Diego sets his jaw and marches out.

“Where’s he going?” Ben murmurs, frowning.

Klaus shrugs. “Leather store?” he offers.

“Klaus,” Luther says brusquely, and Klaus’ head snaps around. “Go stand lookout.”

“Really?” Klaus says, putting his hands over his heart. “You want *me* to stand lookout? Luther, I’m *honored* you would trust me with something so *sacred*....”

“Just go,” Luther grits out.

Klaus waves goodbye (left hand) and leaves, grinning.

“Where should we keep watch first?” he asks Ben. “I was thinking the bar, but there’s also that liquor cabinet on the third floor….”

“Klaus,” Ben sighs, and oh no, there’s that look on his face that means he’s going to try to talk Klaus into something. “Just - let’s find Diego, I think there’s something weird going on.”

“You’re telling me?” Klaus says incredulously.

“No, I mean,” Ben frowns again. “Diego walked away when he *just* saw Five collapse and brought him back. He was always a worrier, remember how he stayed with you after your overdoses? I don’t think he’d leave without something being - off.”

Klaus tries to come up with a rebuttal, and scowls when he fails. To be honest, that *doesn’t* really sound like Diego. Klaus’ annoyance outweighed his happiness whenever Diego showed up to monitor him after an overdose, which is why Klaus doesn’t have an emergency contact anymore. For the stabbiest member of the Academy, he can be a real mother-hen sometimes.

“Fine, fine,” he grumbles, and goes searching for Diego.

It isn’t all that hard to find him. In fact, Klaus all but stumbles over him in the first place he goes, which is the main hall. He puts this down to the fact that Diego is carrying a bleeding, weakly squirming body over his shoulder.

“Uh,” Klaus says, staring.

“Fuck,” Diego says.

“Diego, I believe that’s my line,” Klaus says. “As in, what the fuck.”

Diego scowls. “It’s one of the guys who ambushed us,” he says, almost defensively. “Five didn’t quite kill him, and I thought we could interrogate him.”

“What the fuck, Diego,” Ben mutters, eyes wide.

“Huh,” Klaus says, rocking back on his feet. He peers closer at the man, who twitches. “That’s….very you.”

“Whatever,” Diego says. He starts walking again.

Klaus follows him. Not like he has anything better to do. And really, he doesn’t quite trust Diego with this guy. They were never allowed to be soft, and that has consequences.

They set him up in Diego’s room. Diego doesn’t even bother with tying the man up, and looking at him it’s easy to see why. There’s at least two bullet wounds in the man’s torso, and another one on his leg. He’s not going anywhere, unless ‘death’ counts. That’s coming up soon, that much is clear.

“Alright,” Diego says, pulling out a knife and holding it under the man’s chin. He’s still cognizant enough to feel that, and he freezes, eyes locked on Diego. “Now, I don’t really like it when people try to kill my family. So you want to get on my good side here. It’s going to be difficult, but maybe if you tell me what you know I might like you enough to get you some help for all those holes in you.”

“Please,” the man breathes. Klaus looks away, because he’s heard that word from so many mouths so many times, but it’s always been said just like that. “Please.”

“Now, now,” Diego says. “What did I just say?”

The man shakes his head. “No, please,” he says. “You have to kill me, please.”

Everyone blinks.

“What,” Diego says. Ben looks deeply confused, and Klaus knows his own face is a mirror of that.

“What do you mean?” Diego says, trying to recover.

“That was *Number Five,*” the man says, fear lacing his tone. “That - it *was* him, wasn’t it?”

“Yes….”

The man shudders, and Diego pulls back his knife before it slits his throat. “Then - please just kill me before he wakes up. I don’t want to know what he’ll do to me, *please.*”

“Why do you think he’ll hurt you?” Diego asks. Klaus is glad about that, because he would really like to know the answer to that question himself.

“No, you - you have to - please -” the man babbles.

“Okay,” Diego says. “Okay, I’ll do it. If you just tell me what you know. Promise.”

Klaus shifts uncomfortably. Ben mutters under his breath, “Jesus.”

The man's eyes search Diego's face, and apparently he finds what he's looking for, because he sags in relief. "Okay. Okay - thank you -"

"What happened?" Diego cuts him off.

The man coughs and grimaces. "I - I work for an organization."

"The Commission," Diego says.

The man nods. "Yeah," he breathes. "Yeah, them. I'm just a field agent, lowest level. I -" he wheezes, and takes a couple seconds to catch his breath. "I've never met any of the higher-ups, but there's gossip. You know. Famous figures. Legends. Number Five, he's - he's one of them."

Klaus feels his eyes widen.

"Five *works* for them?" Diego demands, hand gripping his knife tightly

"He did," The man coughs again. "He did. But we got - we got a message, earlier tonight, that an agent had gone rogue, and our orders were to terminate him. So we used the tracker and ambushed him. But I - I noticed the arm. Number Five is missing an arm, everyone knows that. I got scared, and -" the man struggles for breath.

"Fuck," Diego mutters. Klaus agrees wholeheartedly.

"I backed out," the man says weakly. "The moment - the moment I saw the look on his face, and heard what he said, I knew none of us were leaving that diner alive. I tried to get away, but I didn't - I couldn't, not before things went to hell."

Diego rubs a hand over his face. He looks at the man.

"Who's Raithe?" Diego says, and Klaus blinks. He swaps a look with Ben, who seems just as confused as he is.

The man, however, lets out a semi-hysterical laugh. *"Raithe,"* he says, and blood bubbles out of his mouth. "Raithe is the reason I knew we were going to die. He's Number Five's partner. Or - or he was."

Diego leans forward. "Was?"

"He's dead," the man's eyes are distant. "That's - that's what Number Five said. He said The Commission killed him. The *look* on his face…."

The man refocuses on Diego. His eyes are desperate.

"You have to kill me," he says urgently. "Raithe was - I don't even know what he was to Number Five, there were so many rumors, but they were inseparable. They crippled people for insults to each other. They went *insane* if the other was hurt. They were *everything* to each other. If Number Five gets his hands on me, I don't - I don't -"

The man is shaking, trembling violently, and Klaus can tell it's speeding up the whole dying process. Blood is leaking out, all over Diego's floor, filling the air. Klaus takes a step back.

"Please," the man chokes out, blood burbling and distorting the word. "Please, please, please -"

Diego's knife flashes, and the man falls silent. He slumps over.

No one speaks for a while.

"Well," Klaus says at last, unsteadily. "Hell of a way to find out about Five's love life."

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Five wakes up in the Academy infirmary. Again.

He stays still, taking stock of himself. Even through the haze of painkillers, he can tell that the healing his wounds went through has been undone. It's possible he's capable of standing, but he wouldn't quite bet on it. Not yet. At least his injured shoulder is the one he doesn't use.

Five swallows back the sound that climbs in his throat. He's not sure what it would be if it escaped. A sob? A scream? (A name.)

He has eight days until the apocalypse - more like seven, if he's being honest. And here he is, unable to even get to his feet.

"Five?"

That's his name, but it's the wrong voice saying it. He turns to look anyways.

Allison smiles at him. "Hey. How are you feeling?"

He stares at her blankly, before raising his good shoulder a fraction of an inch and letting it fall back down.

Her smile becomes slightly brittle. She reaches out and rests a few fingers on his arm. "You'll be okay. Pogo says you reopened your wounds, but you didn't make anything worse off. By some miracle."

Five blinks at her. Then he remembers. "The tracker -"

"Pogo got it out," Allison assures him. "It's gone. Destroyed."

She picks up a metal tray, and shows it to him. On it sits a tiny lump of plastic and metal that looks like it got on the wrong end of a hammer - or Luther's fist. For the first time, Five notices the bandage around his arm.

"That was the right thing to do, right?" Allison says, with a trace of hesitance. "Pogo said he might have been able to find out something from studying it, but we didn't think we could risk it."

"Yeah," Five says, and he remembers Klaus' steady gaze as it was put in, focusing as hard as he could even through the ghosts, because they both knew he would be the one who had to remove it. Five blinks away the image rapidly and swallows. "It was."

“Good,” Allison says. She puts the tray down, and her eyes sweep over him. “You should get some sleep,” she advises. “Diego wants to talk to you about something, but it can wait until morning.”

Five closes his eyes.

Why not. It isn’t like he can do anything else.

He gives a minute nod, and hears her shift back in her chair.

He doesn’t try to fight it, this time.

****

*“Just out of curiosity,” Klaus says. “Do you have an actual **plan** to avert the apocalypse when we not only don’t know anything about it, but there are people who know **everything** about it trying to stop us? Or are we just going to fail miserably?”*

Five looks up briefly from where he’s looking over the gun. The Commission still insists on sending them weapons every new job, despite more than two months of jobs completed without. Five figures they’ll get the message eventually.

“I thought I was the pessimist here,” he says, rather than admit that he has no idea of the answer to that question.

Klaus just raises his eyebrow in that way that says he sees through Five’s deflection, and is unimpressed. He doesn’t call Five out on it, though, just snorts and says, “Ha. No, I think anyone who commits eighteen years - and counting! - to figuring out time-travel in the hopes of preventing an apocalypse he knows nothing about definitely counts as an optimist.”

”You take that back,” Five says.

“Nope,” Klaus says, popping the ‘p’ and grinning like a lunatic. “Face it, Fivey, you’ve joined the ranks of the Pollyannas! Oh, what a glorious day, my dear little brother has finally found his place in life -”

”I will shoot you,” Five says, lifting up the gun and resting it on his shoulder, finger on the trigger. The safety is on, though, because if his finger slips the sound would attract attention.

Klaus must notice, but he still lifts his hand to his forehead in mock horror. “Five!” he gasps. “You would draw a gun on your own family? Your own blood?”

*“We don’t share blood,” Five reminds him. “We didn’t even when you **had** blood.”*

“Semantics,” Klaus waves away. “And here I was, all ready to give you a present for your stellar behavior. I’m hurt, Fivey. You have betrayed my trust. Betrayed it!”

“What?” Five says, lowering the gun. His arm was getting tired, anyways. “A present?”

“Oh, no,” Klaus sniffs. “Nope. You have dis-earned your present. No present for trigger-happy gremlins, new rule.”

*“Klaus, give me my present,” Five says, putting down the gun and holding out his hand. Klaus always gets the **best** presents (mostly because there’s no barrier to acquiring them as a ghost in the apocalypse, but he doubts Klaus has gained an appreciation for private property since coming back to civilization).*

Klaus pouts at him. “Rude,” he sulks, but he pulls something out from his pocket anyways. Five wonders how long he’s spent staying corporeal so that it wouldn’t fall to the ground.

The present turns out to be….a ribbon. Five looks blankly at it. He’s never been to a fair or contest or anything of the like, but he knows, vaguely, that this is what they give out at those sorts of things. A blue ribbon, with two tassels and ruffled edges. It’s slightly crumpled, and a bit smaller than Klaus’ hand.

On it, in all capital letters, is written ‘WINNER AT: BEING AN ACTUAL PERSON’.

Five looks at his brother. “What.”

Klaus beams and holds it out. “It’s ribbon!” he says cheerily. “To reward you for your mostly-successful integration back into the non-apocalyptic world. Yay!”

“That -” Five snatches up the ribbon and looks at it more closely. “Klaus, I’m not a showdog.”

“Thank god for that,” Klaus giggles. “You’d be such a growly little thing, you’d never get a ribbon this nice.”

Five ignores him and reads the words again. He snorts. “Did you make this yourself?”

“Maybe,” Klaus says.

The answer is obviously yes. The letters are handwritten, the end of it squished into the last half-inch. The ruffled edge might possibly have been cut off of a dress, and the tassels are slightly different shades of blue. There’s a safety pin glued to the back.

“It’s terrible,” Five says, trying to keep his mouth from twitching. “I hate it.”

*“Oh, well excuse me for trying to do something **nice** for my brother, whom I love more than **anything on this Earth** -”*

“I love you too, Klaus, but this is still terrible,” Five says.

Klaus huffs. “So I guess you’re going to throw away all my hard work, then?”

“Definitely.”

They both know he won’t.

****

“We have a few questions for you, Five,” Diego says.

“Oh? Do tell,” Five snipes back. The early morning light streams in through the window, but that just reminds him of how little *time* he has left. He does not feel in the mood for an interrogation right now.

And it *is* an interrogation, however much his siblings are trying to avoid that impression. They’re arrayed in front of him like a panel of judges - well, One through Three are. Klaus is off over to the side, looking distracted. He keeps glancing to the side, probably at Ben. Five still needs to figure out how to say he believes him about that.

“Hey, don’t drag me into this,” Klaus protests. “*I* advocated to let things lie, I’ve been trying to cut down on the amount of maiming in my life.”

Five very carefully doesn’t wince. None of his siblings react to Klaus’ words, but then again they probably don’t realize Klaus is being entirely literal. Klaus rarely spoke in-depth about his time on the streets, but a few anecdotes slipped out here and there, and if Five manages to save the world he has a *list* of certain people that are going to find themselves suffering from a wide array of agonizingly slow yet entirely inconspicuous deaths (at the top of the list: fucking *Carlos*).

“Is that so,” Five says dryly. He looks at the siblings in front of him. “What’s so important that you have to ask me right now, when I’m still convalescing?”

“Oh, they wanted to make sure you can’t get away,” Klaus informs him.

“Basically, yeah,” Diego says. He steps forward and looks Five in the eye. “So, when were you going to tell us about Raithe?”

And

Five

freezes.

He stares at his siblings.

“What,” he breathes. He can’t quite make it into a question.

“You said that name,” Diego says, unblinking. “In the diner last night, right before you fell unconscious. You want to tell us who that is?”

Five can’t think. Can’t move. Can’t even breathe. He’s frozen under their gazes, the prying eyes of his siblings, and he doesn’t dare look to his right. If he looks over and sees Klaus, the entire truth will be written all over his face.

“No,” he manages. “No, I really don’t think I do.”

“Five,” Allison steps forward, hands held out. “We just want to help -”

“There’s *nothing* you can do,” Five says. He can’t seem to get enough air. “There’s nothing *any* of you can do.”

The sheets are rough under his grip. The lights are bright, far too bright. Klaus (not his Klaus, not his brother) is in the corner of his eye, entirely unaware that he’s a walking, talking reminder of all that Five has lost.

“That’s what they did, isn’t it?” Luther says. He sounds almost….gentle. Five can’t remember Luther ever sounding like that. “The Commission. You - cared about him. And they killed him.”

Five can only stare at them. He feels - he doesn’t know what he feels. Hollowed out. Empty.

“What,” Five swallows, but forces out the words anyways. “What do you think the response is going to be to the fight at the diner.”

He gets several confused blinks. Diego frowns. “Five -”

“What,” Five emphasizes. “Do you think the response is going to be to the fight at the diner?”

Maybe it’s the way he stares, unblinkingly, at Diego. Maybe it’s his hand, still fisted in the sheets, knuckles white from tension. Maybe it’s the iron in his voice, warning anyone from challenging it. Maybe it’s all those things. The important thing is that Diego eventually just sighs, and says, “They’ll….probably guess I was there just from the wounds on half the guys, but I was wearing gloves and collected all my knives afterwards. I’ll probably get called in for questioning, but they don’t have any real evidence.”

“And my fingerprints aren’t in the system,” Five says. “So we’re alright on that front. There weren't any security cameras, and no witnesses….I think we got away clean. That’s - good. That’s good.”

With the tracker destroyed, it will take some time before the next guys find them. Undoubtedly, they’ll be assassins. Good ones, too, if The Commission is smart about it.

Five’s opinion of The Commission’s intelligence has been lowered recently, though. After all, they murdered his brother.

Five closes his eyes, and tries to order his thoughts. For some reason, they keep jangling around in his head, refusing to resolve into coherency. He breathes in deeply, and orients himself around the pain that provokes in his side.

“The eye,” he says, looking at his siblings. “I need to find out who owns the eye. It’s from a prosthetics company called MeriTech, they’re right here in the city. How soon can I get up?”

“You shouldn’t be getting up for at least the next couple days.” Luther says.

Five gives him the *Look,* the one he cultivated to cow Klaus into doing things he didn't want to. Although, as he sees movement from the corner of his eye, he remembers that first it was *Ben's* Look, and now *this* Klaus is looking with wide eyes between him and a patch of empty air. Shit.

Well, nothing he can do about that. Five refocuses on Luther and bares his teeth. "Yeah, that's out of the question. We only have seven days left before the" apocalypse "incident, and I'm not going to waste any more time."

"What's this 'we' shit?" Diego says, eyebrows raised. "Last I heard, you didn't want our assistance in the matter."

"I still don't," Five shoots back. He grimaces. "But it….seems I'll have to take it."

He doesn't want to. He would never, *could* never forgive himself if he led his siblings to their deaths, and Klaus wouldn't either (except that's a lie, he knows. Klaus would forgive him anything. He was always an idiot like that). Except if he fails to stop the apocalypse, they'll die *anyways* (again).

Five feels a twinge from his shoulder, and breathes through the wave of pain. He feels shaky, like trying to stand up would send him crashing to the floor.

He wants to do this alone. *Needs* to do this alone. But he can't. He literally, physically *can't,* and even if he rails against the overwhelming sense of *failure* that engenders, Five has always tried to be a being of logic.

And logic says: he needs help.

"We should go to MeriTech as soon as possible," Five says. "Preferably today."

"Uh," Klaus raises his hand. "I'm going to have to opt out, this sounds very….important and all, but my stress levels need some TLC, and, well. This sounds a wee bit stressful."

"That's fine," Five says, the line in his shoulders relaxing a fraction. That's - he'll take that in a heartbeat. He honestly doesn't want Klaus anywhere other than far, *far* away from this shitstorm.

"What? No," Luther says. "Klaus, you're helping. We're going to need the full force of the Academy if we're going to stop this."

"But we don't!" Klaus points at Five. "He said so! I have an *excused absence,* Luther, don't argue with the teacher."

"We don't need him," Five says. It's true. *His* Klaus - well, there's a reason he was always assigned to recon. He was brilliant, and focused, and terrifyingly skilled at using his powers to find out just about anything he cared to. He's literally irreplaceable.

This Klaus is….well. He's still an addict, still afraid of the power resting inside him, still so very *vulnerable.* Five isn't actually sure how he could help at all. Or whether Five could manage to accept it.

“He does have a point,” Diego says, pulling out one of his knives and cleaning his fingernails. “Can’t really think of what Klaus could bring to the table.”

“See?” Klaus says with a laugh. Except Five has spent more than two decades learning to read his brother, and he can hear the laugh is just-so-slightly pained. Shit. He forgot about that, Klaus’ old insecurity over being the ‘useless’ one. Klaus didn’t like to talk about it, and Five doesn’t know how to explain himself without divulging too much.

“Fine,” Allison says, crossing her arms. “Klaus, you can go. Five, what’s the plan?”

Klaus lopes out of the room, and the moment to reassure him, if there was one, passes. Five grimaces, but looks to his remaining siblings. He wonders if Ben is still here, invisibly spying, the way Klaus did so many times over the years. It feels positively nostalgic, that wondering.

He pushes the feeling away. He needs to focus.

“So,” he says. “MeriTech.”

Chapter End Notes

You thought Klaus was joking when he mentioned that ribbon in the last story? Hahaha, no. Cry with me.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Okay," Klaus says slowly. "Those drugs kicked in *fast.*"

"You aren't hallucinating," Ben says, equally slowly. "Not unless you're making *me* hallucinate, too."

Klaus shoots him an incredulous look. If he had more freedom to speak, he'd say *well, then, I guess I've finally learned how to share my high with you,* but there's a slim chance that his siblings actually *are* standing in front of him, and it's always hard to predict how they'll react to hearing him talk to ghosts.

"That's what you left for?" Luther says disapprovingly, and okay, he's leaning more towards reality, he sure as fuck hopes his imagination can't come up with that convincing an impression of Luther. He has enough actual hauntings to deal with, thank you very much. "You wanted to get high?"

"What, you're surprised?" Diego asks.

"Oh no," Klaus says. "No, if anyone gets to be surprised, it's me. Diego. *Diego,* you're - you're wearing a *suit.*"

"A nice one, too," Ben says. Klaus ignores him, because out of everyone present he's the *least* qualified to judge fashion, he's been wearing the same thing for thirteen years. In Klaus' expert opinion, the suit is made of very fine material but is incomprehensibly, indescribably boring. There isn't a *single ruffle.* Not *one.*

Diego grimaces. "Don't remind me," he says, shifting uncomfortably and looking like he is nonetheless being reminded several times per second. There are no doubt a dozen knives hidden under the suit, but he looks deeply awkward to not have any within visible reach.

Klaus can count on one hand all the times in his entire life when he's seen Diego without his knives. It's fucking *weird.*

"We're going to MeriTech," Five announces. Klaus doesn't think he should be up and walking about, but he's pretty sure if he tries voicing that Five will do something unpleasant to him. He's not sure what, but apparently Five has been working as a hitman for the past however-long, so he's not too keen on finding out. "Don't wait up."

Five isn't looking at Klaus, but he gives a sloppy wave anyways. "I don't plan to, no. Good luck with your shenanigans, kids! Drive safe, have fun, use protection!"

Everyone ignores him as they leave. Even Allison doesn't give him more than a backwards glance. Klaus stands in the hall for a moment, staring at the door after it booms shut. The hall

seems very empty, all of a sudden.

….Well, he's not going to wait around like some war wife. Klaus skips into the parlor, Ben following on his heels. He tumbles onto the couch, and pops down the last of the pills from yesterday.

"Klaus," Ben sighs disapprovingly.

"What's with the negativity today?" Klaus says. He stretches until his elbows pop, and divests himself of his coat. He's still wearing way too many clothes, so he shimmies out of Allison's stolen skirt as well. "It's a nice day, sun is shining, birds are chirping, the Power Patrol is on the case and Five's little debacle is going to be thrown off the rails -"

"There's still a body in Diego's room," Ben reminds him.

"Hence why I am declining to be sober, *mein bruder,*" Klaus says. "Can you imagine listening to that sad sack all day? 'No, you have to figure out how to re-kill me, I'm *scared* of the big bad *Number Five'* -"

"Master Klaus."

Klaus flails in shock and falls off the couch. He twists around to look up. "Jesus, Pogo! Warn a guy, will you?"

Pogo looks unimpressed. Klaus wonders if he's been taking lessons from Ben, somehow. *Five* almost certainly has, no matter that he's been gone for seventeen years, because there is no way that *Look* before came from anyone but Ben, no matter how impossible.

Shit, Pogo is still talking. Klaus tries to focus.

"- an ornate box with pearl inlay."

Oh, fuck.

"Really," he breathes out.

"Any idea where it went?" Pogo says mildly, staring down at him.

"....No," he says. "No, I don't, no idea. Sorry."

"Liar," Ben says.

"Drop dead."

"Low blow."

"Excuse me?" Pogo demands, looking startled.

"No, no not you!" Klaus holds up his hands. See, this is why he hates talking to Ben in front of people. He's gotten into some rather *sticky* situations that way. "I just, uh, you know,

there's just a lot of stuff I've been dealing with. Just a lot of memories. All those good times. Well, not so much good times as - really awful, terrible, depressing times -"

"The contents of that box," Pogo interrupts him, which is extremely rude but probably necessary, Klaus was set to go for a while there and he's not so certain he wants to dredge up those memories at all today. Or ever, really. "Are - priceless. Were they to find their way back to the office, whoever took it would be absolved of any blame or consequences."

Ben gives him a *Look.*

"Oh, well," Klaus says. "Lucky bastard."

"Indeed," Pogo says, looking over his glasses.

Pogo limps out of the room, and Klaus elects to stare at the ceiling. It's better than looking at the creepy mounted heads on the wall, or at his oh-so-judgemental brother sitting on the table.

"Klaus," Ben says. "Aren't you going to look for that stuff?"

"Later," Klaus waves his hand, and gets distracted by the veins under his skin. They're *blue,* it's so *weird.* Why hasn't he noticed that before? Klaus pokes at the veins and giggles.

"Klaus," Ben says, and it takes Klaus a second to place his tone. Oh, no. That's the tone of voice that goes with Disappointed Look #4. Klaus *hates* Disappointed Look #4.

Klaus deals with this by closing his eyes so he doesn't have to see his brother. Truly, a genius plan.

Ben sighs. *"Klaus,"* he says, more insistently.

"I can't *heeear yooouuuu,*" Klaus says, putting his hands over his ears. The drugs are really kicking in now, that familiar rush sweeping him away. The voices at the edge of his hearing die (hah) down to faint whispers, and Klaus giggles again. "I can't hear *any of yooouuuu*…."

He feels more than hears Ben's sigh of resignation. Ben is always annoyingly (thankfully) present unless Klaus takes enough drugs to literally stop his heart, so Klaus could definitely hear him if he took his hands away from his ears, but he doesn't really want to do that. Lying here like this, in a sea of blackness and almost-quiet, is the closest he can get to peace.

If he strains, he can catch snatches of his own heartbeat. It's erratic, beating out of time and skipping in places, and he can't tell whether that's from the drugs or if he's hearing it wrong. Whatever. Maybe it'll give out again, maybe it won't, he's not particularly concerned either way.

Klaus isn't sure how long he stays like that. This type of drug tends to make him lose time more often than usual. It's always a toss-up whether that's a good thing, of course, because there are *quite* a few places around town where it's a bad idea to lose higher functions, but when he's in a mostly-secure place it can't be beat in terms of getting high.

Klus breathes, and listens only to his heartbeat.

Some time passes.

Then he becomes distantly aware of Ben's voice. "Klaus. *Klaus.*"

Klaus groans, and lifts up his head. He'd really like to ignore Ben, but he literally can't. Not when Ben says his *name.* Every utterance sends a small, ice-cold shock through him, tugging on his attention. Even dulled by the haze of drugs, he can always tell when Ben is calling him. The downsides of being the world's only true medium - the connection goes both ways.

"Whaaaat," he moans. He might have to pay attention, but that doesn't mean he has to be gracious about it. Klaus could write the book on being ungracious. Well, Vanya sort of beat him to it, but he could've done it too.

Ben sighs. Klaus considers flipping him off, but that would be too much effort. He settles for a lazy glare. Sadly, it has no effect. Stupid dead brothers and their stupid immunity to death glares.

"I think you should call Vanya," Ben says.

Klaus tries to parse that sentence. Once he's sure (or close enough) that he heard it correctly, he squints at Ben in confusion. "What? Why?"

"Because," Ben says, with an air of sorely-tried patience. "She was upset last night, when she left. And she at least deserves to know Five was attacked again."

"Uuuggh," Klaus says, flopping back down. He giggles at the shock against his bones, the way the air is knocked out of his lungs. Reminding him he's alive. "I don't wanna, Ben."

"That's too bad," Ben says, without a drop of sympathy. "Do it anyways."

"Why? Why should I?" Klaus asks, waving a hand, before being distracted by the tattoo on the palm. He brings up his other hand and traces the letters with a finger. G-O-O-D-B-Y-E.

"You remember Carlos?"

Klaus flinches, and his hands drop. He twists to glare at Ben.

Carlos. He's not someone they bring up lightly. Or, well, Ben doesn't. Klaus has always processed his trauma through making light of it, which means he has a whole wealth of material ready to go.

"Why, goodness me," Klaus drawls. "Completely forgot about him. Dear old Carlos, wonder what he's up to, I bet he still has those handcuffs -"

This time it's Ben who flinches. But he interrupts and rolls on regardless. "You remember he tried to find out if you had family."

Klaus presses his lips together and glares a bit harder. He has an inkling of where this is going, and he doesn't like it.

"If The Commission has any sense," Ben continues, "They'll try to go after Five's family. Vanya's the most vulnerable right now, she's not even at the Academy. There's no one there to protect her."

Klaus struggles to come up with a rebuttal, and scowls when he can't. It *is* the most likely course of events. Klaus isn't sure hurting any of them would work very well, because Five never really liked them all that much and they're virtual strangers to him now, but if it worked at all Vanya would be the one that would do it. He always had a soft spot for her.

The Commission might or might not know that….but even if they don't, Vanya would still be the obvious choice to go after. Klaus didn't lie to Carlos for his *powered* siblings.

He heaves a massive sigh. *"Fine,"* he says. "Fine, I'll call her."

Ben doesn't quite smile, but he relaxes, and gives a nod of approval. Hooray.

It takes several tries to get himself upright, and a few minutes to meander to the phone in the hallway. Then he needs to track down Mom because he doesn't know Vanya's phone number, which takes another twenty minutes. Mom is as helpful and smiling as always, but there's a - distance to her. She looks absentminded, which is kind of weird because how do robots even *get* absentminded.

But he gets the number, and at long last he puts it into the phone and listens to it ring.

"Hello?" he hears Vanya say, her voice small and confused.

"Vanya, dear!" Klaus says, waving hello (right hand) even though she can't see it. "How have you been? Sleep well?"

"Klaus?" Vanya says, less small but even more confused, now. "What - why are you calling? Did something happen to Five?"

"Well, sort of," Klaus says. "And by that I mean yeah, he got attacked again last night."

"Oh god," he hears her suck in a sharp breath. "Is he alright? Why didn't anyone call me?"

"He's alright!" Klaus says hurriedly. "Well, that's what he insists, anyways, and no one's stubborn enough to outlast him in saying otherwise. He and the others are off saving the world with fake eyeballs, or from fake eyeballs, or whatever. I wasn't paying attention. And *I* thought -" he ignores Ben's eyeroll with the ease of long practice "- that you might appreciate an update."

"I - yeah, thanks," Vanya says. He hears her take a couple of deep breaths. "They're all gone? I thought I might come over, but…."

"No, no, you should definitely come over!" Klaus blurts out.

There's a short pause. "What?"

"Well, it's just…." Klaus trails off. He's not really sure how to tell his shy, mousy sister that she might be in danger of being abducted and/or killed by Five's former coworkers in an effort to lure him into a trap.

"You're the only one who Five ever listened to, really," he eventually settles on. "Maybe you can get him to make some healthier choices. Like not stuffing Diego in a suit and going off to commit corporate espionage one day after being shot."

There's a longer pause this time.

"....Diego wore a suit?"

"I *know!*" Klaus half-shouts.

"....Alright," Vanya says. "I'll be there soon, I - mm."

"What?" Klaus says.

"Oh, nothing, just - *he's not here, Mrs. Kowalski!* - just my neighbor."

"Okay!" Klaus says. "Well, I'll get the place ready for you. Set out fresh linens, break out the good china -"

He's rewarded by a faint huff of laughter from the other end. Klaus can't remember the last time he heard Vanya laugh. It's - a nice sound. Klaus wonders if he might be able to bring it out again.

"Right, I - oh, hold on." Klaus can hear walking. *"Mister Puddles isn't here, he -"*

There's silence.

"....Vanya?" Klaus says, a seed of worry blooming in his chest. Ben looks up sharply.

There are faint sounds of talking from the other end, but Klaus can't make out anything in particular. Vanya doesn't sound scared, but….

"Vanya?" Klaus says, a little louder. Ben leans forward.

There's a sound from the line, and then Vanya's back. She sounds distracted. "Hey, sorry. I, um - I forgot I had a student coming. I'll still come over, it'll just be a while. Okay?"

Klaus knows what people sound like when they're scared or under threat, and she doesn't sound worried. The tightness in his chest relaxes. He bobs his head and says cheerfully, "Alright! I await your presence, my *dearest* sister. *Au revoir!*"

He hangs up, and meanders back to the parlor.

"What was that at the end?" Ben says. Nag, nag, nag, that one.

“Just a student of hers coming over. You can go spy on them if you want, Peeping Ben,” Klaus waggles his fingers.

Ben huffs. “I’m not,” he says. “But what if it actually was trouble?”

“Then I suppose I would have heard my sister being kidnapped,” Klaus says lazily.

“Or worse,” Ben snaps. He shoves his hands into his hoodie pockets and scowls. “Do you *want* another ghost following you around?”

Klaus closes his eyes. “Shut up,” he mutters.

He can just picture Ben’s glare, and doesn’t bother opening his eyes to meet it. Ben doesn’t say anything else, though, and Klaus hears the telltale sounds of him settling down on something.

And then, *finally,* Klaus can sink into the pleasant haze of drugs without interference.

Chapter End Notes

aka: the chapter where Klaus and Ben *almost* manage to divert the apocalypse.

Chapter 8

Diego hates the suit. Five knows this, because he complains about it up until the moment they're about to go into MeriTech.

"If you don't *shut up,*" Five hisses between clenched teeth, "I'm going to abandon this whole plan and jump into their records room, no matter what it might do to me."

"I don't *need* it, though," Diego shoots back, glaring at him. "I'm not sticking with you to play happy families, and it just makes me stick out -"

"Carrying two dozen knives in a harness and dressing all in *leather* makes you stick out," Allison corrects him. "This makes you look at least *close* to normal."

"'Normal' was never an option," Five mutters. He casts another look at them all - Luther, standing awkwardly in his titantically oversized glory; Allison, effortlessly glamorous and attracting glances of recognition from passerby; Diego, who couldn't look more uncomfortable if he tried; and himself, dressed in this *ridiculous* schoolboy uniform and lacking an arm. "We'll have to make do with what we have."

"And what's that?" Diego asks.

Not enough. "Our stellar teamwork and deception skills, of course," Five says, grimacing.

They all take a moment to absorb that.

"We're doomed," Diego says flatly.

So is the world, Five thinks, and scowls harder.

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"Excuse - excuse me?" Luther says.

Five just barely manages to prevent himself from rolling his eyes. He steps forward and clears his throat. "Excuse me?" he says, deciding at the last moment to not try smiling.

The receptionist looks up, and there's that initial second where she glances at his arm before looking at his face. "Hello," she says with a smile. "Are you here for an appointment?"

….Right. He's missing an arm, and he's at a prosthetics company. Five really should have seen that one coming, in hindsight.

But maybe he can work with this. Mentally revising his pitch, he nods to her in a semblance of civility. "Ah, no, actually." Polite. Be polite. "I'm actually here because I found a prosthetic eye, and it had your company's name on it."

Five holds up the eye. Even holding it, he has to suppress a feeling of panic at having it out in the open. He keeps a firm grip on it, and makes sure to keep her hands in his peripheral.

Luther shifts uneasily behind him. “We’d like to return it to it’s rightful owner,” he says, slightly stilted. Five hides a wince, and prays the receptionist doesn’t notice.

“Aww” she says, and her eyes go soft. “What a thoughtful young man.”

Five very graciously ignores that. It’s not like he’s *old,* he can pretend she wasn’t being patronizing.

“Would you mind looking up the name for me?” he says, moving his lips upwards in a polite smile. He can do that without alarming anyone, right? Just a small, empty smile.

Thankfully, she buys it. She smiles back and looks at her computer. “I can call down one of our specialists for you to talk to, alright? Would you and your father like to sit down?”

This time his smile is a shade more genuine. “Of course.”

Well. Step one hasn’t faltered yet. They didn’t even need to bring in Allison. He glances back to the doors leading in, where his sister is lurking with a large pair of sunglasses and a headscarf. She looks vaguely sketchy, but if they need her she can pull out the star power in a moment.

Apparently she doesn’t want to use her *actual* power to help, though. They had an - *intense* argument about that. Klaus didn’t mention (probably didn’t know) that she’d undergone something of a reformation. Under other circumstances, Five would be proud that she’s realized how damaging her power is, but since *the fate of the world is at stake,* he’s mostly just feeling exasperated anger.

They wouldn’t even have to do this ridiculous rigamarole if Allison would just fucking *cooperate.*

Five tries not to slump in his chair, the brief burst of triumph gone.

Fuck, he hopes Diego is doing better than them.

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They’re ushered into an office with entirely glass walls. Five tries not to grimace. They can’t exactly resort to threats when anyone can look over and see them. Well - Klaus might. But he was always reckless like that.

The doctor is an early-to-middle-aged man in a spotless white lab coat, with a stethoscope wound around his neck. Maybe it’s the air of petty, smug superiority he wears around himself like a cloak, but Five has the persistent urge to grab that stethoscope by both ends and *pull* as hard as he can.

He restrains himself, however, and takes a deep breath.

“Look, I’m not asking for much. I just need a name.”

“I understand you want to return this eye, young man, but the rules are clear. I need the patient’s consent.” Grant or Lewis or whatever his name is says, in a tone of finality.

Five bares his teeth. “We can’t *get* consent if we don’t have a *name.*”

“Then I’m sorry, but you’re out of luck. But,” Fredrick says, leaning forward and holding out his hand, “I can just take it now, and return -”

“Yeah, you’re not *touching* this eye,” Five snaps, hiding it behind his back.

Parker looks frustrated, but not half as frustrated as Five feels. “Look, it’s very admirable of you to want to return this eye, but I’m afraid I’ll have to take it from here.”

Five throws a glance at Luther, perched awkwardly on the edge of the chair. Luther’s gaze skitters between Five and Derek.

“Um,” Luther clears his throat. “What my - my son - is saying, is that he would find it very - fulfilling, to hand the eye back to its original owner. It’s become something of a - passion of his.”

*You have **no** idea.* Five keeps his face blank.

Wesley is unmoved. “Be that as it may, I *still can’t give you the patient’s name without their consent.*”

Five grits his teeth, and forces his jaw to relax.

Okay. Time to try a different tactic.

“Look,” he says, trying to make his voice sound pleading. It’s difficult when he’s overwhelmed with the desire to jump across Bertram’s desk and stab him in the throat, but he gives it his best shot. “I’d be just *devastated* if *my* prosthetic,” he twitches the stump of his right arm, “was lost. If someone found it, and went through as much trouble as we’re going through now to return it, I’d want to thank them in person.” He finds he can’t make his eyes water on command, and compensates with a slight waver in his words. “I’m just so worried about them. They must be missing their eye an *awful* lot. It’s really *scary* when you lose your prosthetic.”

Luther is looking at him like he’s grown two heads. Five wants to kick him, but that would probably undermine his performance.

“You don’t know what it’s like,” Five says earnestly. “Losing a part of yourself like that. They’re probably - embarrassed, and upset, and I just want to make sure, *in person,* that they’re okay. Seeing their face when I give it back to them would be just….the *best* moment of my entire life.”

Mostly because he’s going to give it back by stuffing it down their throat, but he doesn’t need to say that.

“So - please?” Five blinks at Quincy, hoping he’s radiating ‘sad disabled child’ instead of ‘pissed-off assassin’.

Leighton looks uncertain. He bites his lip. “I….”

“Yeah,” Luther says, leaning forward in his chair. Five whips his head around. “It would mean a lot to us. If you could just overlook those regulations, that would be great.”

“I -” Preston’s face hardens. “No. No, I’m sorry, but I can’t do that.”

Five hisses in a breath and grips the eyeball so hard his bones creak. White-hot *rage* clouds his vision and tangles up his muscles, locking him in place, which is the only reason Luther gets through the next several seconds with his life.

“- going in circles, and that’s not how I want to spend the rest of my day.” Five’s hearing reports, and he realizes distantly that he must have missed some of the conversation. Digby stands, his professional mask not managing to completely cover the irritation beneath. “May I walk you out?”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Luther says.

“Yes,” Five says. He smiles at Wentworth. It’s not a nice smile. He can taste blood. “Please. Show us out.”

Cleyton looks slightly unnerved, but he doesn’t say anything. Luther almost protests, but Five *glares* at him, and something on his face must get through that thick skull, because his brother shuts up.

They follow Xanthippe out of the office and to the door. Allison perks up as they approach. Behind her stands Diego.

“Have a good day -” Cholmondely starts to say, before Five grabs his arm and drags him through the door and over to Allison. He ignores the spluttering this produces.

“Uh, Five?” Allison says, looking uncertain. The sidewalk is deserted, which will do nicely.

“Did you find anything?” Five asks Diego. Widmark struggles in his grip, and he digs his fingernails into that one nerve Klaus showed him. There’s a breathless squeaking noise.

“Not a damn thing,” Diego says, tugging on his collar.

“Right,” Five says. He turns to Allison. “Rumor him.”

“What - Five, no,” Allison frowns at him. “Just let go of him and let me talk -”

“He’s beyond reasoning,” Five says. Bagelton tries to say something, and Five stabs the nerve again. This time there’s a small, high-pitched scream. *“Rumor him.”*

“Five, I think you should calm down -” Luther tries to say.

"I am calm," he hisses. "I am *perfectly calm.* I just need to find out where the *fuck* this eye came from so I can save the *fucking* world, and the only thing that's in my way is my *fucking sister.*"

"Don't talk to her like that," Luther says warningly.

"Or what?" Diego drawls. "Or you'll do what, Luther? You gonna swoop in to save your lady?"

"Five, I don't *do* that any more," Allison says.

"*You* need to stop talking," Luther says to Diego.

"Gee, that's swell, Allison," Five snaps back. "But guess what - *you need to.*"

"Be a big old knight in shining armor?" Diego taunts, grin sharp and dark. "Maybe you'll even get a kiss out of it -"

"No, *you* need me to," Allison says, scowling. "And I'm not doing it."

"Diego, *shut up,*" Luther clenches his fist.

"You were always happy to do it when we *didn't* need it," Five says, anger bubbling beneath his skin. He clenches his fist, and Quigleyson's knees buckle. He barely stays upright, and his face is the color of curdled milk.

Allison flinches. "I - Five, that's *why* -"

"I'm just telling the truth, *brother,*" Diego says. "Come on, did you two really ever think you were fooling anyone -"

"Just *fucking do it,*" Five hisses. "You useless fucking *idiot* -"

"I don't think it was ever that hard to fool you, *D-D-Diego,*" Luther bares his teeth, stepping closer, and then in a blur of movement they're throwing punches, the heavy *thwack* of Diego's fists hitting Luther's bulk contrasted against the whistle of air as Luther swings at Diego.

"Five -" Allison looks genuinely upset now, and she takes a step back, but Five has come too far for this, lost *far* too much. The world depends on this, he travelled back for this, *Klaus died for this* -

"Rumor him!" Five barks at her, advancing. *"Just fucking rumor him, I swear to god if you don't fucking rumor him* ***right this fucking second,*** *Allison -"*

"I heard a rumor you told us about the eye!"

The words burst out of her as if propelled by a rocket, and they're so loud that Diego and Luther pause their fight to stare at her.

“Allison?” Luther says.

But Five isn’t looking at his siblings. Instead, he’s looking at Fruitbert, and the familiar glaze in his eyes.

“I -” Allison stutters. “I didn’t - I -”

Five grins and releases Stoatfucker, and keeps his eyes glued to him as he follows him into the building. None of his siblings follow him, and he’s fine with *that.* Honestly, he has no idea what he was doing bringing them along in the first place.

“What’s the serial number on the eye?” Hangdrinker says, in that floaty, absent tone Allison’s rumors elict.

Five rattles off the serial number out of memory, and they reach the file room. Midgejury opens a cabinet and starts thumbing through it.

There’s a buzzing under Five’s skin, like electricity sparking through his veins. His heartbeat thunders in his ears. He reminds himself to breathe.

This is it. *This is it.*

“It’s not here.”

Five blinks.

“What?”

“The eye,” Klunflicket says, blinking slowly and looking at the files. “That eye hasn’t been sold. It hasn’t even been manufactured yet.” He blinks again, and a spark of life kindles in his face. “Where did you get that eye?”

“No,” Five breathes. No, it can’t be.

Jinthelgit frowns, and blinks again. “Young man -”

Five can’t hear him. Can’t even pretend to hear Olthinmertin is saying as he slowly pulls himself out of the rumor’s grasp.

It can’t be true. It *can’t* be.

All this time. All this time - *twenty-two years* of holding onto this eye, twenty-two years of wondering and hoping and believing, and now -

“Love you, Five.”

Now he has *nothing.*

Five hardly registers a hand coming towards him, and without thinking he grabs it and bends back two of the fingers until they *snap.* The resulting scream jars him out of the fog laid over

his mind.

He blinks at Kscnanwdkcw, crumpled on the ground and holding his hand to his chest. Shit. That will call security for sure.

Five darts out of the file room, and books it for the exit.

Through some miracle, he makes it out of the building without being caught by security, and he only has to jump once. The action jars his wounds, but not as much as last night. He breathes heavily, deeply, because it's still more of a strain than he can ever remember it being (save for a few, rare times).

Coming out onto the sidewalk, Diego is the only one there. Five looks blankly at his brother.

"They took a cab," Diego says. "Something about Allison being upset. Luther looked kind of pissed at you, too, you might want to watch out when we get back to the house."

Five can't bring himself to care about his siblings' feelings. Not now. Not when he sees flashes of silver-blue light every time he turns his head, feels the weight of the useless lump of plastic in his pocket. Not when he isn't sure he'll ever be able to feel again.

"Hey, did you find our perp?" Diego asks. "Whoever owns the eye?"

Five looks at him. He isn't sure what his face looks like, but Diego takes a step back.

"No," Five says. "No. I didn't."

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Vanya arrives a bit before six, which isn't very long in the grand scheme of things, so there's absolutely no reason to sit around worrying about her. So Klaus doesn't. At all.

"Vanya!" he cheers, skidding into the main hall as he hears the door open and the sound of hesitant footsteps creeping in (he's not sure how Vanya manages to make even her footsteps sound hesitant. It's probably because she's so tiny.)

She looks startled at his enthusiasm. Behind him, Ben heaves a sigh of exasperation, as if he wasn't the one pacing around half-advocating for Klaus to go and check on her an hour earlier.

"Hey, Klaus," she says, with a smile as small as she is. It's genuine, though, which is a rarity in Klaus' life, so he beams back.

"May I take your coat, Miss Vanya?" Klaus says in something vaguely reminiscent of a British accent, holding out his hand and doing his best to look like a stuffy English butler.

"That depends," Vanya says. "Will I get it back?"

"It's about fifty-fifty," Klaus replies honestly, which earns him another huff of laughter. It's even nicer to hear in person.

"Then I think I'll put it away myself," Vanya says, shrugging it off. "Are they back yet?"

"As much as I would like this all to be wrapped up in two hours or less, I don't think it's that simple," Klaus sighs theatrically. "If only we were in a movie, we'd be lazing around watching the credits roll by now, the earth safe once again! - unless it's a tragedy and we all die. That's possible, too."

Vanya shoots him a look. "Are you high?"

There's that familiar slant to her mouth, disapproving and exasperated and dismissive. Klaus knows that look by heart, he's seen it so *very* many times over the years. It's always accompanied by varying levels of annoyance, although to Vanya's credit there's a minimum of that.

Honestly, it doesn't even faze him anymore. And while the peak of his high passed a while ago, there's still a lovely buzz in his blood, carrying him along. So he has no problem with grinning and replying, "Yeah! You should try it sometime, sis, it's very *freeing*."

"Are you trying to get me into drugs?" Vanya sounds disbelieving.

“What?” Klaus runs over what he just said in his mind. “Oh, no, no, no no no. I didn’t mean - not the hard stuff or anything. You stay away from that. But a pinch or two of something small might just get you to -” he waves a hand, vaguely. “Let your hair down? I have some special chocolate, if you ever want a square. Just offering.”

Vanya looks like she doesn’t know whether to feel incredulous or touched. She eventually settles on saying, “....Right. Um, do you know where Mom is? I didn’t get to talk to her yesterday.”

Klaus is pretty used to none of his siblings wanting to stick around him (he doesn’t blame them, most days *he* doesn’t want to stick around him), so he just shrugs and points her in the direction he last saw Mom. They can have some mother-daughter bonding time, maybe that will help with whatever crossed-circuit situation Mom is dealing with.

Once she’s left, he looks over at Ben. “*Now* will you stop nagging?”

“Never,” Ben says at once. Klaus really didn’t expect anything else, which is why he only throws up a single middle finger.

Klaus decides to go through the parlor for any more shiny knicknacks. Yesterday’s search yielded a few, but if he wants to get more of the good stuff he needs something gold-plated. Or *solid* gold. Daddy probably has some of that somewhere around here.

Barely ten minutes into the search, he hears the door again. Luther’s voice floats in.

“- an asshole. I don’t think we can get him to apologize, but maybe if you explain -”

“I really just want to forget about it,” Allison says. She sounds….off. Almost - shaky? Klaus looks over at Ben, and from the look on his brother’s face, it’s not just in his head.

There’s a pause, then Luther says, reluctantly, “Alright. If you say so.”

“Yeah,” Allison’s voice firms up. “Yeah. I do.”

There’s a longer pause.

Klaus is debating the pros and cons of going to interrupt their little moment (he may just witness something one should never witness their siblings doing, but if they find him eavesdropping he’d be lucky to get away with a few broken bones), before he hears Allison clearing her throat.

“I need to call L.A., there’s some appointments I need to move if I’m going to stay here and deal with Five’s - whatever it is. And then I think I’m going to just - lie down.”

“Yeah,” Luther says, voice slightly rougher than normal. He coughs. “Yeah, okay. You do that, I actually have to go out for a bit, I’ll be back soon.”

“Really? Where?”

“Just - out.” And if that doesn’t sound dodgy as hell, Klaus will roast his coat and eat it.

He can easily imagine the arched eyebrow Allison must be giving Luther, but she was always the softest with him, and after a second, she sighs out, “Okay. See you later.”

“Bye,” Luther says. Klaus doesn’t have to imagine the way he must be staring after Allison as she walks away. He saw it enough when they were kids. Those two really weren’t subtle, no matter what they thought.

Klaus looks between the door and the couch as he hears Luther’s booted feet stomp away (not because he’s mad or anything, just because any kind of walking Luther does turns into stomping when he’s that big). Stairs sound so *arduous* right now, but he doesn’t particularly feel like running into more of his siblings today.

“You should probably eat something, if you’re going to pass out again,” Ben says. He sounds bored.

“Ugh,” Klaus says, in lieu of an answer. But he tromps off to the kitchen, and pulls out some cold cuts from the fridge. He doesn’t break his glare from Ben the entire time he eats. Ben stares levelly back, smirk firmly in place.

Goddamned asshole brothers and their fucking dickish mother-hen tendencies. All he needs is Diego coming by and telling him to eat healthier or some shit. Like he can afford to live off kale and eggs and whatever Diego uses to fit himself into that bondage suit. And it’s not like he’s going to die of old age, so Klaus really doesn’t see the point in denying himself the simpler pleasures in life.

Speaking of - it’s been a while since he slept in an actual bed without anyone on the other side snoring or hogging the covers or demanding a handjob at three in the morning. The thought of an entire mattress all to himself has Klaus brightening up, even if it’s located in this torture facility disguised as a place of higher learning. He finishes off the cold cuts and lopes off to his childhood bedroom. Even the stairs are no match for the siren call of sleep.

Klaus doesn’t particularly feel like running into more of his siblings today, but apparently after thirteen years he’s due to start tripping over them every time he turns around. It isn’t long after he settles down into his bed, covers tucked under his chin and pondering when he’ll be able to slip off to the pawn shop (probably tomorrow morning, he’s just too tired right now), when Five comes into the room.

Klaus blinks at him. It takes Five a couple seconds to notice him, but when he does he blinks back.

“Uh,” Klaus says. He darts a glance at Ben.

“He’s really here,” Ben confirms, in a tone that sounds slightly confused, but nowhere near as bewildered as Klaus feels the situation warrants.

Klaus refocuses on Five. “Five,” he says. “Have all those years away messed with your head? This is *my* room. Yours is down the hall.”

“Right,” Five says. He isn’t looking at Klaus - come to think of it, he’s barely looked at Klaus at all since he’s come back. His eyes are fixed on the wardrobe with a disproportionate amount of attention. Klaus knows he has a fantastic selection of clothing, but Five has always had terrible taste in fashion, so he’s probably not admiring the outfits held within. “I know, I just - walked in the first room I could find.”

Klaus eyes him in disbelief. “And it was *my* room? Again?”

“Again?” Ben says. Klaus ignores him.

“A coincidence,” Five says, still staring at the wardrobe.

“Uh huh,” Klaus says.

Then it hits him.

“Oh. *Oh.* You were trying for Vanya’s room. Yeah, I sort of annexed that, sorry.”

It didn’t last all that long. Klaus is actually surprised it took him longer to leave than Vanya, even if it was only by a couple weeks. Ben’s death was the nail in the coffin (hah) for all of them to start breaking apart, like they always knew they would but never found the guts to before it. Maybe the gaping absence of Five was why. None of them wanted to be the next to leave, until Ben did so in a much more permanent manner.

Klaus doesn’t remember Vanya leaving, really. That entire period is a blur in his memory, his failed attempts to tell his siblings about Ben driving him to honestly impressive highs (and lows). He vaguely remembers pleading with Mom to tear down the wall, and the euphoric rush of redecorating his room to fill the new space. Then a few weeks later he went out to meet his dealer and just….never came back.

It’s still an unfamiliar sight, to look around his room and find it so much bigger than he remembers. He can’t imagine what Five is feeling.

“....Yeah. That.” Five says. He blinks again and sighs. He closes his eyes. His hand comes up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

If Klaus ignores the cut-off sleeve of Five’s uniform, he can almost convince himself that standing in front of him is his thirteen-year-old brother, the Five he remembers. The one who always strove to make himself the center of their father’s attention, who was absolutely cutthroat in any test or spar, chafed endlessly at the restrictions placed on them, and completely fucking blew his top the mere suggestion that he wasn’t capable of doing something.

It’s - hard, realizing that all of Klaus’ memories of Five are faded, dulled around the edges. Until Five plopped down in front of them, his only reference for Five was that terrible picture over the fireplace. And while Five actually did have that *exact* expression whenever he was reveling in his own superiority, there are other memories Klaus has of his brother that he wanted to hold onto. Ones he failed to.

Some of it is time, some of it is drug use, some of it is trying to actively push them away because he hates his fucking family but god, he loves them too (he's always loved them) and it just *hurt* too fucking much. Not when none of them knew what happened, not when he of all people knew Five wasn't actually dead but never knew more than that.

He still doesn't know much more than that. He's almost afraid to ask.

But….

"Hey," Klaus says hesitantly. "Five?"

Five still doesn't quite look at him, but he shifts his body slightly towards Klaus. "Yeah?"

Klaus braces himself, and keeps an eye on Five for any hint of violent retaliation as he says, cautiously, "I'm sorry about Raithe."

Five stops breathing.

"Wanted to say it before," Klaus says. "But you, ah, didn't seem to be in the mood."

A statue stands in the middle of his room. Klaus is almost tempted to comment on it, but he manages to refrain. Several seconds tick by.

After nearly a minute, Five finally takes a shallow breath. Then another.

"Thank you," Five whispers, so quietly Klaus is half-convinced he imagines it.

"....You really cared about him, huh," Klaus says.

"Yes."

"Did," Klaus pauses. "Did you love him?"

"Yes." There isn't any hesitation when Five answers. He blinks rapidly.

Klaus blinks as well, in shock. He runs the word through his mind again, but it doesn't change.

Ben is openly gaping in the corner. Klaus feels a deep kinship with him.

He tries to imagine Five admitting to loving anyone. Even Vanya was more of an inferential fondness, and The Book made it clear that while he was much softer with her than the rest of them, he never actually *said* anything about it. Honestly, Klaus was always halfway certain Five is violently allergic to any positive, touchy-feely emotions.

Except he just actually stated, *out loud,* that he loved another human being. With words. Zero hesitation.

"....Well," Klaus says weakly. "He must have been quite the guy, then."

Five makes a sound that only sort of qualifies as a laugh. He glances at Klaus, before his gaze skitters away. “Yeah. Yeah, he was - incredible. You would have liked him. A lot. And he you.”

Klaus can feel his eyebrows crawling up into his hairline. “Oh?”

Five snorts, and wipes at his eyes with his sleeve. “Definitely.”

Klaus attempts to imagine someone who would get along with both himself and Five. When he tries to picture them, their face just keeps warping into Ben, because that’s the only person on the planet who has *ever* managed to tolerate the both of them. And Ben is a saint, okay, he’s an undeniable *asshole* but he’s also a literal saint. Klaus is quite aware that anyone else would have ditched his junkie ass to move on to the Great Beyond years ago, and Ben actually liked spending time with Five as a kid. God only knows why.

“Well,” Klaus says, when for once in his life, his imagination fails him. “You’ll have to tell me more about him, when you’re ready. I have a lot of boyfriend-judging to catch up on, Allison didn’t let me meet Patrick and I think Vanya’s a pocket-sized lesbian.”

“What,” Five says, jerking his head around to stare at Klaus.

“Don’t quote me on that,” Klaus says hurriedly. “I haven’t seen her in years, it’s just speculation, you know how -”

“No, no,” Five says, shaking his head. “I - no, Raithe and I weren’t - *together.* God, no.”

Klaus blinks. “Um,” he says. “You literally just said you loved him. Like, out loud.”

“Yes,” Five snaps. “But not like *that!*” His eyes graze over Klaus and he shudders, looking pointedly at the wall. “Ugh. *No.*”

Klaus feels something in his chest. It’s….cold.

“Why not?” he says slowly.

Five grimaces. “Don’t put that in my head, Klaus. Just - *don’t.* I’ve heard *enough* of that, and it’s annoying and disgusting and - just don’t. We weren’t *like* that, okay?”

Klaus can’t seem to breathe very well.

“Okay,” he hears, and then he realizes it came from his own mouth. It’s strangely normal-sounding. “Okay, fine, not a boyfriend. A brother-in-arms, then?”

Five’s face goes blank. “Something like that.” He twitches a bit, and turns away. “I should go. I still have research to do.”

“Okay,” Klaus hears himself say. He watches Five leave.

He realizes his hands are shaking. He looks at them.

Ben is in front of him. Klaus blinks.

“Klaus,” Ben says. He reaches a hand out, hovers it over Klaus’. His eyes are wide. “Klaus, I’m sure he didn’t mean it like that. He doesn’t think that.”

Klaus swallows. He stares at Ben.

“He *doesn’t,*” Ben says firmly. “Klaus -”

Klaus doesn’t listen. He rolls back down on his bed and pulls the covers over his head and tries very, very hard not to cry.

He doesn’t quite succeed.

Chapter End Notes

You all thought Five's vehement denials of him and Raithe being lovers would be funny. *You were so very very wrong.*

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Five looks out the window at the darkening sky. He puts his hand on it. Slowly, he leans forward until his forehead bumps against the cool glass. It's late, late enough that the sky is almost dark. The sun hasn't quite yet slipped over the horizon, but it's nearly there. The view from this particular window isn't the best, but Five jumped here to avoid Vanya, who seems to be looking for him for some reason. He doesn't really feel like talking to her. To anyone, really.

He stares out over the city.

Talking to Klaus is a minefield. Talking to Klaus *about Klaus,* when his brother doesn't know that's who they're talking about, is - Five can't even come up with a suitable metaphor. He can't believe he got through that conversation without breaking down crying (much).

Five closes his eyes and wrenches his mind away from thoughts of his brother (impossible, but he tries). He needs to think about the future. The future, and the rapidly-approaching apocalypse.

He needs to stake out MeriTech. Just because the eye hasn't been sold yet doesn't mean it *won't* be. Sometime over the next seven (almost six now, fuck) days, someone will lose an eye and order a prosthetic. And then that someone will go on to wipe out all life on Earth. Starting with his siblings.

There has to be a way to monitor the incoming patients. Whatever-His-Name-Is seemed fairly high on the food chain, he'll probably know. As boring and frustrating as stalking some petty, self-important doctor sounds, it's his best shot. He'll have to steal a car - preferably a van. It'll look out-of-place, but so will he. Can't be helped.

Five opens his eyes.

The last dying rays of sunlight flicker over the rooftops. The sky is a dull grey, clouds drifting across the sky. It doesn't hold a candle to the sunsets in the apocalypse. After the first few years, the ash stopped being such a problem, and while there were more cloudy days than not, there were times when the sun reflected off them just right and the entire sky glowed with reds and purples. Sunrises, too. It was on those days, those mornings, when Klaus would excitedly shake him awake and drag him outside. They would sit outside, all three of them, and watch the sky get painted with colorful light.

The three of them….

Five swallows.

The piece of paper in his pocket seems to weigh far more than it logically should. The address….Five has it memorized. He even knows how to get there from here. The streets are nearly unrecognizable, the buildings tall and strong and blocking the view, but if he combines the address with the faded memory of finding Delores all those years ago, he can trace out a path to where she must be now. Gimbel Brothers' Department Store.

He wants to see her. He wants to hold her. He *wants,* so badly it aches, to see her face and hear her laugh and touch the smooth plastic of her skin. He wants to look at her and be *seen* in return, by someone who knows him, by someone who was there for him, who loves him and accepts him and supports him. Someone he doesn't have to hide from.

But -

"Love you, Five."

- he *can't.*

How could he tell her? How could he walk up to her, look her in the eye, and explain that he helped murder Klaus? That his brother - her best friend - is permanently, irreversibly dead, and he's the one who did the work to make it possible? And it's not like he put up such a fight when it actually happened. He froze - he fucking *froze,* and his hand couldn't even knock aside the gun.

He was right there, in the center of the storm he helped to create. And he didn't do a fucking thing.

How can he *tell* her that?

Five feels the tears trickling down his cheeks as he stares out the window. He stays there until the sun is set, the last glow of evening has gone cold, and there's nothing left but the darkness of the city stretching on and on, forever.

****

The next morning, Five is woken by a heavy hand rapping on his door. He blinks in the early morning light streaming in through the curtains.

He glances at the clock, and - well, he was going to get up soon anyways. MeriTech opens in an hour, and he still needs a stakeout vehicle.

But the rapping on his door comes again, and that means one or more of his siblings are outside it. Likely here to talk him into doing something like share more information or participate in a 'family activity' that has nothing to do with the apocalypse, neither of which he's inclined to cooperate with.

For a brief moment, he considers throwing himself out the window. It isn't that far of a drop. He's had worse.

Klaus always smacked him when he did that, though, even if it really was the most tactically sound course of action (Calhoun saw him get smacked many, many times, but even Klaus had

to admit that the rickety old fire escape wouldn't have held the weight of three bodies and a Christmas tree). So Five reluctantly goes to answer the door.

Luther is standing outside. Five raises an eyebrow.

"Five," Luther says. "Get dressed. We're having Dad's funeral out in the courtyard."

"We haven't already?" Five says, bemused.

"No, we were going to, and then you…." Luther shifts from foot to foot.

Damn it.

"Fine," Five says. "As long as it doesn't take too long, I have places to be."

The gathering in the courtyard is a sad affair. Sad as in 'pathetic', that is. There's a light rain, more of a drizzle than anything, that seeps into the very air around them and renders their umbrellas useless. Five crowds next to Vanya, partially because she takes up the least space under her umbrella and partially because her company is the most tolerable right now. She sends him a shade of a smile, and he can't quite smile back but he can lean against her, very briefly. An apology for avoiding her last night.

Pogo stands next to Luther. Five hasn't spoken to Pogo since he got back, hasn't even seen him, really, so the grey hairs and cane are a shock. They shouldn't be, but somehow in the course of twenty-two years Klaus forgot to mention Pogo grew *old.*

Klaus has a clear plastic bell umbrella with pink trim. Five remembers that he tried to gift one with vaguely similar decoration to Five as a present a few years into the apocalypse. Five flatly refused to use it, and instead used a plain black one, identical to the ones now huddled in the courtyard.

He wishes he could use it now.

"Did something happen?" Grace asks. Five blinks at her.

"Dad died," Allison says, frowning. "Remember?"

"Oh," Grace says. "Yes, of course."

"Is Mom okay?" Allison asks Diego, who can generally be relied upon to keep track of their 'mother's status.

Something tickles in the back of Five's mind.

"Yeah," Diego says. "Yeah, she's fine. She just needs to rest. You know, recharge."

"She just got out of her charging station," Vanya points out. Diego shoots her a look, and she shrinks back.

“Um,” Klaus says, the words mumbled around the cigarette he’s struggling to light. “She’s been acting kind of weird, lately. I tried to get her to come and stitch Five up, when he first came out of his big lightning-ball of doom, and it was like - she didn’t even hear me.”

Oh.

Oh, fuck, Five knows what’s going on.

“What?” Allison says, looking over at Klaus in confusion. “Why didn’t you say anything? Pogo, is Mom okay?”

“Miss Allison,” Pogo says firmly. “I will look at Grace later. Right now, we are paying our respects to the dead.”

Soon, that will include Grace, Five thinks, his stomach churning.

Klaus didn’t remember much of the week leading up to the apocalypse, but he *did* recall that Grace was acting strange. Her hardware was degrading, it sounded like. Eventually, they’d had to switch her off. Klaus didn’t remember whether they’d managed to bring her back online before the world ended, but he didn’t have a high confidence of it.

It hadn’t been such a concern of Five’s, compared to preventing the apocalypse, so he’d almost forgotten about it. But faced with the signs of Grace’s decay right in front of him, he finds it hard to look at her.

Even if he manages to save the world, there’s a very good chance he can’t save her. The one man who fully knew how she worked is now in an urn in Luther’s oversized hands.

Five wouldn’t go so far as to say he loves Grace. Not like his siblings do, who all call her ‘Mom’, and certainly not like Diego does. Every time he looks at her, he gets reminded that ultimately, she’s Reginald’s creation. But -

She’s the closest thing to a mother he ever had. That means *something.*

Five swallows.

“Whenever you’re ready, dear boy,” Pogo says to Luther.

Luther’s jaw works for a moment, before he uncaps the urn and tips it over.

The ashes fall out in an anticlimactic rattle, clumping together in the cold rain.

“....Probably would have been better with some wind.” Luther mutters.

“Does anyone wish to speak?” Pogo asks.

Five stares blankly at him. He hasn’t seen Reginald in more than two decades, and it’s not like his last memory of the man is a particularly fond one. He doesn’t *have* fond memories, in fact.

Mostly, he just feels apathetic. The old man is dead. Hooray, can he get to preventing the apocalypse now?

"....Very well," Pogo says, with a faint trace of disappointment. He grips his cane and bows his head. "In all regards, Sir Reginald Hargreeves made me what I am today. For that alone, I shall forever be in his debt. He was my master….and my friend, and I shall miss him very much."

Pogo is probably the only person besides Luther who can say that with a straight face. Five rolls his eyes.

"He leaves behind a complicated legacy -"

"He was a monster," Diego says flatly.

Klaus wheezes out a burst of laughter in the silence that follows. Five remembers the jazz hands he used to announce Reginald's death to Five, and can't suppress a smile.

"He was a bad person and a worse father. The world's better off without him." Diego continues.

"Diego," Luther says warningly. It's in the same tone he used yesterday at MeriTech, and Five knows at once that their fight was only put on pause. It's always only put on pause.

"My *name* is *Number Two,*" Diego says, stepping closer to Luther, staring him steadily in the eye. "You know why? Because our *father* couldn't be bothered to give us actual names. Did he ever actually call you by your name, *Number One?* In all those years you stayed here, did he ever *once* use your name?"

"You need to stop talking," Luther says, quietly.

"He *never* cared about us. Not *ever.* Why can't you get that through your tiny blond head? He didn't love you, he wasn't proud of you, he didn't give a *fuck* about you!" Diego steps closer. There's a feeling in the air, like electricity, the moment before a lightning strike. Strange. Five works his jaw to get his ears to pop.

"Diego," Luther *growls.*

"Not that there's *anything* to be proud of in the *first* place!" Diego jabs a finger into Luther's chest, an absolutely vicious look in his eye, and it's the last straw. Luther throws a punch.

Five does not fucking *care* about this. He rolls his eyes, considers the fight in front of him, considers MeriTech's opening time, and turns on his heel to walk back into the Academy. Vanya's yell to *'stop it!'* mixes with Klaus' encouragement to *'hit him, hit him!'* as he leaves.

Honestly. Sometimes he doesn't know why he bothers.

****

After basically becoming a self-taught mechanic in the apocalypse, hotwiring a car is child's play. Five finds a white van he likes the look of, and in a few minutes it's his. He vaguely remembers Klaus commenting that the 'white van' look is characteristic of serial killers and kidnappers, but….well, he kind of *is* a serial killer, and he certainly hasn't ruled out any kidnappings. So it's perfect, really.

Five isn't unaccustomed to working on his own - Klaus was often tied up in doing recon, and being left on his own isn't overwhelmingly unpleasant for short periods of time. It helps that the sounds of the city filter in through the slightly-cracked window, and that he can see the people walking along the streets, alive and bustling.

His thoughts linger on Delores, but he wrenches them away. He's not getting her. He's *not.*

MeriTech doesn't have many people coming in this early. Mostly just employees. Five scans them, and they all look similar to Doctor Whoever - immaculately clean uniforms and faces that practically beg to be rearranged.

Speaking of, he doesn't see the man coming in. Five puzzles over that for a while. Did the rumor have aftereffects? Five can't remember something like that ever happening, but his information on Allison's abilities is a little out of date. Maybe that's why she decided not to use them anymore?

It's only when he notices the increased security compared to yesterday when he realizes that - right, he broke the man's fingers. Most people don't have the guts to continue working for a while after that happens. He probably took *vacation days.*

Having only ever held one job in his entire life (arguably two, but it's not like child superheroing drew a paycheck), where the concept of vacation days was met with a only-barely-metaphorical gun-cock and a gesture to get back to work, Five snorts. If he's remembering right, he only broke two fingers. Wimp.

Still, that was probably unwise. The increased security is….problematic. Five chews on his lip, and presses a hand to his abdomen.

The wound twinges at the pressure. It's not *terrible,* but it's still a bullet hole. It's a miracle none of his organs were badly damaged. Five estimates, with data soaked up from hanging around a doctor for twenty years, that it will take between two to three months to heal fully. Longer, if he keeps stressing it like he's been doing over the past couple days. At least the one in his shoulder doesn't actually impact his mobility. He's grown used to his lack of arm, but he never thought he'd see the day where he'd be *grateful* for it. It hurts, sure, but pain he can deal with. He's always been able to deal with pain.

The two wounds together put a sharp limit on his space-jumping. Which, while not the main weapon in his arsenal, is a fairly significant one. And the one most relevant to gathering information.

Five takes a deep breath, and catches himself before he looks over to his right. He's not even sure who he expects to be sitting there.

He leans back in the driver’s seat, and keeps his eyes glued to MeriTech.

It’s only a matter of time.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so LISTEN UP, PEOPLE.

I have a hankering to write more drabbles. But I don't know what I should write about. So I have come up with the brilliant idea of asking for suggestions! What would you like to see, and whose POV would you like to see it from? I will pick the top FIVE suggestions I like best, and write them. So spare no imagination!

Ready? Steady? Go!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> Thank you so much everyone, for all your suggestions! They're all wonderful! I've tentatively assembled a list of the ones I'm going to write, and will begin posting them sometime in the next week. Meanwhile, here's the next chapter!

The fight ends, predictably, with drawn blood and broken surroundings. At least Ben stops glaring at him for egging them on once his statue is demolished. He always fucking hated that thing. Klaus would probably get thoroughly murdered by all of his siblings if he admitted to sneaking in and defacing it once in awhile, but he was working at the literal behest of the deceased. When your dead brother wants you to glue a live octopus to his own statue, you do it.

(Klaus can't even remember where he *got* the octopus. Ben just starts laughing anytime he asks, so he's resigned himself to never knowing the answer.)

He stays outside to have the pleasure of putting out his cigarette in Daddy dearest's ashes. It's quite cathartic. Ben is still sending satisfied glances in the direction of the statue when Klaus stands up, so overall it looks to be the start of a very pleasant day for everyone.

Skipping back into the Academy, Klaus considers his options. He could go back to bed. That sounds nice. Take advantage of the roof over his head. Or he could eat breakfast. That might hold off more of Ben's nagging for a while. Discarding his umbrella, Klaus peer back out at the rain. If it lets up later, he has some things ready to go to the pawn shop.

Klaus always carries around *something,* so it's not like he's coming down right now. But he's built up a slightly astonishing tolerance over the years, so the bits of the 'special' chocolate he ate earlier are only good enough to *just* let him distinguish reality from otherwise. A flimsy little barrier between him and a whole football stadium's worth of ghosts.

Christ, Luther and Diego have certainly been busy.

But ignoring the shadowy figures flickering in and out of view, and the distant yet steady din of screams, is second nature by now. Klaus hums to himself to counteract the noise, and sashays into the kitchen.

Mom is standing at the stove, cracking open an egg into a pan. Diego sits at the table, cleaning his fingernails with a knife. He glances up briefly. He looks unhappy.

Klaus surveys the scene, and weighs whether or not breakfast is worth dealing with Diego and all his ghosts. Honestly, of all his living siblings, he's seen the most of Diego over the

years, which doesn't translate to being all that fond of him. But if there's one thing Klaus has learned living on the streets, it's to take whatever food he can get, wherever and whenever he can get it.

Plus, he hasn't had Mom's cooking in *thirteen years.* This must be rectified.

Klaus pulls out a chair for Ben, and plops down in another. "One more, *liebe Mutter!*" he sings.

She glances back at him and smiles. "Of course, dear."

Diego presses his lips together.

"What's with the long face?" Klaus asks him. He stretches, and grins as he feels the *pop pop pop* of his bones.

Diego looks even more constipated. He digs his knife into the arm of his chair.

"She already made breakfast," he says, quietly.

Klaus pauses. He glances over at Mom. Now that he's looking, he can see the sink already has a pan soaking in it.

"....Oh," Klaus says.

"Shit," Ben mutters.

There really isn't anything else to say.

They sit without talking for a while, until Mom cheerfully sets down the eggs in front of them.

"Eat up!" she says, smiling. Klaus smiles back at her, because even if there's something wrong with her circuits she's still *Mom.*

"Danke," he sings, and digs in. Diego does so as well, more slowly.

Halfway through his plate, Ben speaks up. "You know, Diego still has that body in his room."

Klaus chokes on his eggs. Diego glances at him.

"What," Klaus finally wheezes out.

Ben shrugs. "He slept in an empty bedroom. Tell him to get rid of it before it starts to stink up the house."

"I - ugh," Klaus says. He turns to Diego. "Brother dear," he says, bringing his hands together. "Please tell me you don't still have a body in your bedroom."

Diego looks shifty.

“Oh my god,” Klaus says.

“I haven’t had the chance to get it out of the house yet,” Diego defends. “I cleaned up the blood, and it’s wrapped up. I just need to find a clear window to dump it.”

“Oh my god,” Klaus says.

“Hey,” Diego glares. “You wanna help out, maybe?”

“No,” Klaus says, holding up his hands. “No, I really don’t. Why would you invite me to dump a body? You do know my thing is dead people, right? It will *traumatize* me, Diego, it really will.”

“Yeah, well, I tried going home last night and there was a patrol car stationed there,” Diego snaps. “The sooner I can get rid of anything connecting me to the diner massacre, the better.”

“...So you want to drag me down with you?” Klaus says. “That’s low, Diego, I thought you loved me.” He makes a pouting face to express his heartbreak.

Diego scoffs and stabs at his eggs. “What’s there to love?”

Klaus’ heart *twists* all of a sudden, very painfully, for no reason. He rubs at his chest, absently, and goes back to eating.

“Klaus,” Ben says quietly. “You need to talk to Five.”

Klaus gives that suggestion all the consideration it deserves, which is none. He continues eating, and doesn’t respond. Ben doesn’t push, but it’s definitely going to come up later. Klaus plans to just ignore him until he learns to stay quiet about it. It’s worked before.

Honestly, Klaus isn’t actually sure why he feels upset. So Five thinks he's disgusting. Big deal. Klaus has been called far, far worse. Not by any of his siblings, admittedly. But he's always known they find him annoying and childish and selfish and pathetic and - and so on. They dislike pretty much everything else about him, so really, the surprise here is how long it took for *this* to become a problem.

So there's really nothing to talk about. And he's going to stick to that.

He keeps eating, scraping the last bits of food off the plate. He really has missed Mom’s cooking.

Then Allison marches into the kitchen, shoulders thrown back and head held high. It almost disguises the deeply shaken look on her face. Klaus blinks at her.

“Come to the parlor,” she says. “I found something you need to see.”

****

Klaus stares at the little television, but the image doesn’t change. Once again, Mom turns her back on Dad, and walks away as he starts to shake and falls over.

Honestly, if it didn't say some deeply concerning things about Mom's programming, Klaus would applaud her for being such a badass. What he wouldn't *give* to be the one standing there, smiling at Dad's collapsing form.

"You really think Mom would hurt Dad?" Vanya asks, her eyes glued to the screen.

"I think…." Luther hesitates. "I think she's degrading. Klaus, what did you say earlier? About her not listening?"

"Uh, I mean," Klaus scratches his head as all eyes swivel to him. "I tried to get her to come patch up Five, when he first came back? And she - offered to make cookies."

Everyone absorbs that.

"We need to turn her off," Luther says firmly.

Predictably, Diego loses his shit. "Whoa whoa whoa, she's not just a *vacuum cleaner* you can throw in a *closet!*" he snaps. "If she's hurt then we need to *help* her!"

"How?" Allison asks. "We don't know how she works, the only one who did was Dad."

"Exactly," Luther says. "I don't like it, but it's the best course of action."

"No it's *fucking not!*" Diego shouts. "You're talking about *killing* her! She's a person, she *feels things,* I've seen it!"

Klaus sighs and moves out of the way, sipping from the glass of whiskey in his hand. Another fight is imminent, he can feel it in the air.

"Is that Dad's monocle?" Vanya says.

Klaus looks over in surprise as Vanya pauses the video. The others do as well. Vanya points.

"She's taking Dad's monocle," Vanya says, glancing at Luther. "That's probably where it went."

"Huh," Klaus says lazily. "Looks like Dad's death was natural after all. Sorry to burst your bubble on the whole murder angle, Luther, but it looks like Diego is innocent after all."

"What?" Allison frowns at him. "Klaus, that was just a theory, and no one said anything about accusing Diego."

"Oh, please," Klaus grins at her. "We all knew he was accusing Diego. Really," he says to Luther, "Don't you think there would have been more stabbing if Diego killed Dad? Diego *loves* stabbing people. Go look in his room!"

"Shut up, Klaus," Diego snaps.

"That can't be right," Luther says, frowning and watching the video again. "I looked through the whole house, I didn't find the monocle anywhere. If Mom took it, where is it?"

“She might have thrown it out,” Vanya suggests. “If she’s really degrading that badly….”

Luther looks uncertain, but slowly nods. Klaus notices Diego shifting slightly, and even half-drunk he can read the very faint aura of relief his brother gives off before he hides it.

Klaus draws his own conclusions about what happened to the monocle. He doesn’t bother voicing it. Honestly, he couldn’t really care less.

Luther sighs. “That just means we really do need to turn her off.”

And then Diego’s up in arms again. “No we *don’t!*”

“She just stood there, Diego, and watched our father die!” Luther says.

“I’m with Luther,” Allison says. She doesn’t exactly sound happy about it, but she takes a sip of her whiskey and looks resolved.

“Oh, big surprise,” Diego drawls.

“Shut up,” Allison shoots back. Ah, there’s the Allison he remembers.

Eyes turn to Vanya. She takes a half-step back at the scrutiny, and fumbles for words. Klaus downs more alcohol. God, he’s not nearly drunk enough for this.

“Yeah, she shouldn’t get a vote,” Diego says.

“I was going to agree with you,” Vanya says, frowning.

“- Okay, she should get a vote. What about you, stoner boy? What you got?”

It takes Klaus a second to realize he’s being addressed. He blinks at everyone. “Uh,” he says. “Can I take a rain check? At least until there’s no bodies in the Academy? That’s kind of distracting right now.”

Diego glares at him. Luther shakes his head. “Are you high?”

“Sadly, no,” Klaus sighs.

“Can you focus?” Allison snaps. “This is Mom we’re talking about, you can at least extend the courtesy of pulling yourself out of drugs for one minute.”

“Oh, big words from someone who wants to *turn her off*.” Diego bites.

“Shut up,” Allison glares at him, then turns it on Klaus. “Well?”

“Look, I think we should all just hold off on this for a while,” Klaus attempts. “You know, postpone the discussion. Tensions are high, and hey, Five’s not even here -”

“That’s not going to work,” Ben comments, almost idly.

“No, I think we *should* do this now,” Diego grits out. “Klaus, make a fucking decision.”

“No!” Klaus throws up his hands like a petulant child.

“Klaus, just say yes or no,” Luther says.

Klaus flips him off.

“Oh my god!” Allison snaps. “I heard a r-”

- then she cuts herself off, and her face goes absolutely *white.*

Klaus blinks at her.

“Did you just try to rumor me?” he says. “Geez, pushy.”

“What the fuck, Allison!” Diego barks, glaring at her.

“I - I didn’t -” Allison stutters. The glass slips from her fingers and falls to the floor. It shatters, sending glass and whiskey in all directions.

“Allison,” Luther says, instantly focused on her. He tries to move towards her, hand outstretched, but she flinches away.

“I have to go,” she says thickly, and rushes out the door before anyone can stop her.

Klaus frowns after her. What was *that* about?

****

“Seriously, though,” Klaus says, “What was that?”

Ben shrugs. “It looked like she was upset at almost rumoring you.”

“Okay, but she’s never had a problem with that before,” Klaus argues.

(She really didn’t. Klaus remembers, briefly, that time he extracted a promise from her when they were twelve that she wouldn’t rumor him into being straight, even if Dad told her to, and it was like pulling teeth. Then it turned out the old bastard didn’t even care, which just goes to show the futility of trying to predict the dubiously-human being that is Reginald Hargreeves.)

He leans back in his bed and pops his feet into the air. He feels the blood rush down his legs as he wiggles his toes. They’re sadly bare. He’ll have to filch some nail polish from somewhere (probably Allison) to brighten them up.

“People change,” Ben says. He casts a glance at Klaus. “Sometimes.”

“Why, thank you for the compliment,” Klaus grins at him.

“It wasn’t one,” Ben says flatly.

“Eh,” Klaus says. He wiggles a hand. “Depends on how you look at it.”

Ben rolls his eyes.

Klaus hums to himself, and when he finds that inadequate he leans over and picks up the CD player on his nightstand. The headphones are still in good shape, and the music comes through clearly despite its age.

Still, he hesitates before starting it up. He sniffs at himself, and winces. Not even *nearly* the closest he's come to being a walking trash heap, but unlike other times he has access to indoor plumbing at the moment. Klaus hops off the bed and dances to the door.

"Taking a spa day, brother dearest," he throws behind his shoulder. "Don't bother interrupting, the children can take care of themselves."

"You're still high," Ben calls out, though his voice doesn't hold any expectation of being listened to. "You shouldn't be taking a bath."

"That's the best time to be taking a bath!" Klaus says back, brightly. He goes into the bathroom, the one with the big clawfoot tub, and turns on the water.

He snuck out in the afternoon to pawn more knicknacks (and look for those papers he threw out, but that was a bust, and it looks like he'll just have to weather Pogo's Disappointed Look. Klaus thinks he'll survive - Pogo's good at Disappointed Looks, but Ben is better, and those are what he's been building up an immunity to for the past thirteen years), and is now currently enjoying the floaty feeling that comes from ingesting - actually, he can't remember which drugs he took. Whatever, they're *good,* and that's what he cares about.

He places the CD player close at hand, and sinks into the bath once the water gets high enough. He sighs at the blissful warmth. God, it's been too long since he could have a proper bath. His last one….was it eight months ago? Klaus isn't so sure that one counts, considering he had to share it with a really pushy one-night-stand who insisted on bathtub sex even though he *told* her he wasn't in the mood.

Klaus ducks his head under the water and holds his breath. It's an old habit, seeing how long it takes him to come up for air. When he's like this, in the closest he can get to things being silent, his mind starts to turn on itself. Apparitions manifest behind his eyelids, screaming, pleading, calling out his name -

Breaking through the surface, Klaus gasps for air. He shudders, and grabs for the headphones. A song starts playing. He lights a cigarette, too, because why not.

'I should be better off without you ~
You take a pride in making me blue ~….'

He closes his eyes and smiles to himself, leaning back in the tub.

After a minute or so, he gets out of the water. He's not quite ready to divest himself of the music yet, and it would be just ridiculous to electrocute himself in the bathtub. Ben would never let him live it down.

Klaus wraps a towel around his hips, and the next song is playing, so he sways to the beat. Hm, time for another dose. He doesn't *feel* like he's coming down, but he can hear a few faint thumps and screams through the headphones.

He dances for another couple minutes or so, until the song winds down.

Klaus opens his eyes.

And he has just enough time to see a fist flying at his face, before everything goes black.

Chapter 12

By the end of the day, Five can't fool himself any longer.

He's going to get Delores.

It's not so much a decision as it is a fact. Every part of his mind screams out that it's a *terrible* idea, he can't tell her, she'll be horrified and angry and she'll *hate* him just as much as he hates himself and it will be justified, every last bit of it -

But he needs to see her. He *needs* to. She's the only person in the world (the only person left) who knows him, who he knows, who he can look at and be looked at in return without there being a stranger on both ends.

Five leans his head against the steering wheel. It's dark out, the last of MeriTech's employees leaving the building. He can come back tomorrow, there's nothing left to gain from staying right now.

Several minutes pass. His breathing is the only sound he can hear. It scrapes against the inside of his skull, takes up far too much space.

Eventually, he lifts up his head. He takes a deep breath.

And then he starts the car.

Driving is - doable. It's much, much harder when his missing arm is the *right* one, because all the important things are on his right, but he manages. Pulling up the driver's seat all the way at least allows him to reach the pedals, although that makes the acrobatics he needs to grab the gearshift more painful. He has to lean nearly horizontally across the seats to get the right angle to turn the keys. And it's a good thing the roads are so quiet, because his first instinct upon hearing a loud noise - like, say, a car horn - is to jump away.

There's a reason Klaus was the one who always drove.

But Five knows *how,* at least, partly thanks to learning before he lost his arm and partly because it rankled to lose that, afterwards. He always hated being unable to do something merely because he'd lost a limb. Klaus, to his credit, never offered to help with anything more than once. If Five refused, he dropped it.

Five wonders, as he rolls down the streets, if he's going to spend the rest of his life like this. Constantly assaulted by memories every time he turns around, every time he spots an otherwise innocuous trigger. If he's going to keep feeling this constant, full-body *ache* that isn't quite pain, isn't quite grief, but is more like half of him has been violently ripped away and his body just can't make sense of it. He feels like an open wound, hemorrhaging his lifeblood into the dirt, and he can't even bring himself to stem the bleeding. There's always more to pour out.

He wonders if it will stop, one day. He's not sure he wants it to.

It wasn't like this the first time - not quite. When he buried his siblings, it wasn't even a question of *if* he could save them, just *when.* He doesn't think he ever even made a conscious decision about it. Just knew, from the second he realized they were dead, that he *would* save them.

He grieved them, of course. *God,* he grieved them, even more when he realized that no matter when he went back to, he'd changed enough that his childhood relationships with them were forever lost. But there was never doubt that he could save them. He didn't *let* himself feel doubt about that, wrapping himself in a cloak of certainty that he wore until it became a second skin, because thinking otherwise would feel like -

It would feel like this.

Five parks in front of Gimbel's. If he turns his head just slightly, he'll see into the doors, into the blackness of the store within, but he can't seem to make his body obey his commands.

He sits there for a long, long time.

Then he opens the car door, and gets out.

Jumping is much easier than yesterday. Still infuriatingly limited, compared to normal, but today's sedentary nature has clearly helped with his healing. Five would make a mental note to do it more often, but realistically he expects at least another gunfight or two before this whole thing is over. Without the tracker, it will take whichever assassins are sent a while to track him down, but not forever. Depending on their skill level, it might happen anytime in the next one to three days.

And he wouldn't bet on The Commission sending incompetents a second time.

The store is dark, and he takes a moment to grab a keychain flashlight. As he clicks it on, it falls on a mannequin.

Five's heart suddenly jackhammers in his chest, before he notices it's not Delores. He stands, fixed to the floor, as the roaring in his ears abates. The light is wobbles slightly, and it takes him longer than it should to notice that it's because his hand is shaking. All of him is shaking, in fact.

He tries to make that stop. It takes him a few minutes.

Slowly, he shuffles his feet forward.

The store is normal enough - for the time, anyways. Even four and a half years away from the apocalypse, he can't erase the insistent warnings in the back of his mind to search for the fault lines in the walls, look for spots where the roof could cave in, watch the ground for broken glass. Brushing by the racks of clothing has him evaluating them for durability in winter, coverage from scrapes and cuts, or if they'd make good cleaning rags. There's the ever-present lookout for food and other supplies, honed to pure reflex at this point.

Of course, it's complicated by the fact that all of these things get instantly derailed whenever the light lands on a mannequin. As he moves deeper into the store, Five feels his breath catching harder with every figure he passes.

He shines the light in front of him -

and she's there.

Five stops, staring. He almost drops the light, but that's unacceptable, so he grips it hard enough that the plastic digs trenches into his skin.

"Delores…."

He doesn't realize he's said her name until he hears it. It's the only sound in the store, but Five thinks he could hear it in a warzone.

She looks at him.

'Five,' she says. *'It's been a while.'*

She's smiling.

Why is she smiling?

She shouldn't - she shouldn't *smile* at him. She doesn't know what he's done. She doesn't know Klaus is *gone.*

Five's eyesight blurs. The light shakes violently in his hand, skittering across the walls. He gasps in a breath, but it's not enough. He doesn't have air in his lungs, why can't he *breathe* -

'Calm down,' he hears Delores say firmly. She's not as good as Klaus at bringing him down from a panic attack, but he taught her the process. *'Listen to my voice. Breathe in to the count of four.'*

He can't. He *can't.*

'Yes, you can. Breathe ***in,*** *Five.'*

Five isn't sure how he manages, but he gulps down air. He's not sure how long it takes, but Delores seems to consider it good enough.

'Good. Now breathe out, counting to four.'

Five almost loses himself to hysterical laughter when he realizes the number she's using (Four is gone, doesn't she know that?), but the half-accidental release of breath accomplishes the goal. He breathes out.

Without prompting, he sucks in air again. He can't hear her instruct him again, he'll break down laughing or crying or something else, he doesn't even know.

It takes several more minutes to gain control of himself again. When he feels steady enough, he points the light down at the floor. He doesn't lift his head.

'Well,' Delores says at last. *'That was not the greeting I expected. Five, if I can ask - what* ***wrong?'***

A choked sob works its way out of Five's throat. He finally can't keep himself standing any longer, and falls to his knees. He forces himself to look up at her. To watch her face. He deserves this, to see her realize what he's done.

"Klaus," he whispers, and if Delores' name was a gunshot then this is an atom bomb. It's the first time Five has said it out loud, used it to refer not to the Klaus back at the Academy, but *his* Klaus. "They killed him. They used my notes. He's dead."

Then he snaps his jaw shut and stares at her. Waiting for judgement.

The seconds feel like hours, frozen in eternity as Delores stands still. Processing.

'Oh,' she says. *'Oh, no.'*

Five can't see her anymore. The tears trickle silently down his face.

Silence reigns.

'Get me down from here, Five,' she says eventually.

He hesitates, but he couldn't deny her anything right now. He just expected it to be more along the lines of 'go jump off a building' than 'get closer to me'.

The flashlight gets set on the floor, and Five steps onto the platform. Slowly, carefully, he detaches Delores' upper body from her legs.

'Now set me on the floor,' Delores instructs.

Five isn't sure where she's going with this, but he can understand not wanting him to touch her longer than is necessary. He quickly sets her down in front of the platform, and steps back.

'Sit down,' she says. It isn't an invitation.

Five more or less collapses where he is, knees folding of their own accord. He can't tear his eyes away from her face. He can't read her expression, but then she always did have the best poker face of all of them.

She looks at him, and there's a slow softening of her features.

He blinks.

'It wasn't your fault,' she says.

For a moment, the words don't make sense. Five stares at Delores, struggling to process the sounds that just came out of her mouth.

"What," he croaks. He blinks, rapidly, and shudders. His fist clenches. "No. No, no, Delores, you don't understand. He's dead. He's *dead,* and I *helped* -"

'And I am saying that ***it was not your fault,'*** Delores interrupts.

"It *is!*" he snaps. Tears blur his vision again. "I wrote the equations they used, it wasn't even *possible* to hurt him before that, and when they attacked I was completely fucking *useless!* He's dead, Delores, and don't you fucking say it isn't my fault!"

Five shouldn't be shouting at her, but she needs to *understand.* She needs to see the magnitude of his crimes, needs to know that he couldn't even keep his own brother safe, that he failed not once but twice.

(And if his tone or his words hurts her - isn't that just typical? He is so very, very good at hurting people.)

'Would he?'

Five freezes.

He stares at Delores.

"What?" he whispers.

'If Klaus were here,' she says, staring him levelly in the eye, *'Sitting where I am, looking at you, and hearing you say it's your fault - would he agree?*

Five's heartbeat thunders in his ears.

He swallows.

"No," The word scrapes itself out of his throat. "No, he wouldn't."

(He was always an idiot like that.)

Delores remains silent, her eyes resting heavily on him.

Five ducks his head, but he can still feel their weight pressing down on him. It's not the accusation he was expecting, not the anger or blame he sees every time he catches a glimpse of his reflection in a mirror.

It's not any of that.

It's worse.

'Five,' Delores says gently. *'Look at me.'*

He doesn't want to. He can't.

He does anyway.

‘I love you, Five,’ Delores says. *‘I love you, and so did Klaus. As much as you can’t change what happened, you can’t change that, either. Stop trying.’*

Five tries to choke back a sob, and fails. He doesn’t even bother trying with the next one.

‘Come here, Five,’ Delores says.

He can’t disobey. He all but lunges forward, gathers Delores up, and clings to her. Her hand rests against his back, and it prompts a new wave of tears.

It’s been so long since he was hugged.

‘Let it out,’ Delores says. *‘Just let it out.’*

Five does.

He sits there, on the floor of Gimbel’s Department Store, torn in two, and he cries.

****

It’s morning by the time he heads back to the Academy.

He brings Delores. She told him in no uncertain terms that he wasn’t going to leave her behind, and he knows better than to argue with her when she gets that look in her eye. And honestly, he didn’t protest very hard. He didn’t realize just how lonely he felt, before.

MeriTech opens soon, and while he really doesn’t want to face his siblings again he needs food to last him through another day of stakeout.

Five parks the van just down the street from the Academy. He looks at it with trepidation.

‘Not planning to stay long?’ Delores asks from the passenger seat.

“No,” Five says, sighing. “I’m just going to pop in and get supplies for the day. I - don’t really want to talk to them right now.”

‘Will you ever?’ Delores asks. Five ignores her.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” he says, and gets out of the car.

Walking up to the Academy gates is - not nostalgic. Nothing so positive. But for a moment, he’s thrown back in time, back to when he really was thirteen, returning from another mission and bursting with confidence and self-satisfaction. Surrounded by his powered siblings, peering through the windows to maybe catch a glimpse of Vanya so he could tell her all about their latest adventure as soon as possible. Feeling solid and stable - not content, never content, but secure in his abilities and his place in the world.

His arm - his single arm - reaches out to the door, and the image blows away like smoke.

Five sighs, and opens the door.

And his eyes are immediately arrested by the sight of the chandelier on the ground, twisted metal and broken glass scattered everywhere.

Five nearly stops breathing.

His head snaps around, and he takes in the rest of the devastation. There's bits of broken furniture visible through the doorway to the parlor, and torn curtains and wall hangings strewn about, and *oh god there's bullet holes -*

Five doesn't realize he's jumped until he sees his new surroundings. Klaus' room. Of course he jumped to Klaus' room.

Klaus isn't here, though, and Five's heart nearly bursts with terror. He sprints out of the room, ignoring the jolt of pain from his side.

"Klaus!" he hears himself call out. "Vanya! Anyone!"

Why did he stay at Gimbel's so long, he's an *idiot,* he *knew* they'd send people, and if they couldn't find his tracker they'd look in the most likely place he'd be and *he wasn't here -*

"Five?"

He whirls around. "Allison!" He jumps down the hall to land in front of her, making her flinch back. He scans her up and down. "Are you okay? Is everyone okay? Who did they send?"

"I - yeah, yeah, calm down, Five, we're all okay," Allison holds out her hands. "A few bumps and bruises, but we drove them off."

"Five?" Luther pokes his head out from a room. "Oh, you're back. Yeah, there were two of them, in weird animal masks. A man and a woman."

Five runs through all the male/female assassin pairs he knows. "Was the man wearing cowboy boots? Or did he recite Beowulf as he fought?"

"What?" Allison blinks at him. She looks at Luther.

"Uh," Luther looks baffled. "No…."

"Okay. Was the woman dark-skinned, kind of aggressive?"

"Yeah, that was her," Allison says, her face darkening. "I owe her a punch or two."

Hazel and Cha-Cha, then. Five hides a wince. They aren't on his level, but they're some of the best. And he's currently handicapped….

"Okay," Five rubs the bridge of his nose, and looks at his siblings. "And you're sure everyone's okay?" he can't help himself from asking. "Klaus? Vanya?"

“Vanya’s fine, she went home,” Allison dismisses. “Klaus -”

Then she blinks.

She looks at Luther.

“Wait,” she says. “Where’s Klaus?”

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

> I know several of you were eagerly anticipating Hazel and Cha-Cha recognizing Klaus as Raithe. However, sadly, I don't actually think H&CC know what Raithe looks like. They mistook an overweight tow truck driver for Five, so I don't think they ever met him in person, and since Klaus spent half his time at The Commission invisible they'd have even less opportunity to see him, if their downtimes even overlapped at all. I hope the truly ridiculous amount of irony present in this chapter makes up for the disappointment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Klaus' head snaps back from the force of the blow, and he can't help but laugh. He feels the telltale trickle of blood running down his nostrils, and as he grins at Pinky it drips onto his teeth.

"I think *someone* has some anger issues!" he crows. The old-penny tang of blood fills his mouth, and he swallows it down. It's a dear friend, by this point.

The taunt isn't his most original, but he thinks he can be given a bit of slack. Depending on what the time is, exactly, they're nearing half a day of torture. It's a little distracting.

At least he earns a hiss of annoyance from Pinky. He hears a sigh from Blue, sitting on the bed behind him, and grins wider.

"You want to try strangling?" Blue offers. His tone isn't the most hopeful, however.

"With *pleasure,*" Pinky hisses. She stomps behind Klaus, presumably to grab a rope.

Oh, I'll show you pleasure, Klaus thinks. As the material (wire, very nice) slips around his throat, he shoves away the context of *why* this is happening and instead focuses on the constriction around his windpipe, the feeling of being so deeply, *intimately* in someone else's power -

"Number Five, where is he!" he hears Pinky bark (hah).

"Don't - stop -" Klaus gasps out. "I'm - almost - there -"

Black spots are dancing across his vision as he hears, slightly muffled, "Is that a…."

"Yup," Blue says.

Booyah, Klaus thinks, as Pinky all but rips the wire away with a groan of disgust. He spends the next several seconds coughing, sucking in air like a bellows, and mentally congratulating himself. Popping a boner on demand is a very useful skill to have, at least in his experience. Usually the other people in the room see it as a good thing, as well, but he's used it as a psychological weapon before. He's flexible.

(Literally. If they progress to sexual torture, they're going to get some interesting surprises.)

He shakes himself and laughs a little. "Nothing like a good *strangling* to get the blood flowing, am I right?" His voice is scratchy from the wire, and the words scrape against the inside of his throat. It's hardly a tickle compared to the pain scattered across the rest of his body, though. He shakes a bit more, giggles slipping out at random intervals.

"What's so funny, asshole?" Blue smacks the side of his head, and Klaus lets out a yelp. Jesus christ, don't these two know the first thing about torturing? If they give him brain damage, he can't tell them *anything.*

Klaus decides to answer him anyways. Not like he has anything else in the way of entertainment here. Really, these two are quite terrible hosts.

"Well, for one," he says, working his mouth to maybe let his abused throat feel better, "You've spent the last ten hours beating me senseless, and you've learned….absolutely nothing." he ducks his head and curls his mouth up in what is only technically a smile, and huffs out a laugh. "Nobody tells me shit. The truth is, I'm the *one* person in that house nobody will even notice is gone."

And it's true. Even if his existence *does* cross his siblings' minds (highly unlikely in the first place), they'll almost certainly dismiss his absence. He's always flitting about, going to and fro, avoiding stability like the plague. Leaving the house with no one the wiser would be perfectly in-character for him.

There's the faintest possibility they'll notice that him going missing after an *armed attack on the house* is significant, but -

To be perfectly, brutally honest, he's not really sure they'll *care.*

"You assholes kidnapped the wrong guy!" he crows, and devolves into breathless laughter.

He gets smacked again *(ow),* jarring him out of what may have soon slid into hysterics. He'll have to thank Blue for that later.

"Please make him stop talking," Blue says.

Better men than you have tried, Klaus thinks, and grins. They can hurt him all they like, but they can't make him incapable of talking if they want to know what he knows.

"Let's waterboard him," Pinky says, before slapping a towel over his face.

Then there's water, pouring over him and seeping into his mouth, dripping into his lungs, making air a distant memory -

But it’s not the first time he’s been waterboarded, and he doubts it will be the last (unless he dies here, of course), and he catches the water in his mouth and gargles it. It actually helps with his throat, as long as he can ignore the insistent need to breathe.

The towel is removed, and he ostentatiously gargles again before swallowing. “Ah,” he sighs. “I needed that.”

“Aw, come on!” Blue says. It just makes him smile wider.

“I was so parched….” he continues, digging the needles in deeper. “Thank you. Thank you….”

His two hosts adjourn to the bathroom, where he can’t quite make out their words but can hear the tone of their voices. He knows that one well, the ‘what the fuck is wrong with him’ tone. Klaus smiles faintly at hearing it, before glancing over at the corner.

“Having fun?” he asks.

Ben stares back at him solemnly. “Define ‘fun’,” he says, a bit flatter than usual.

“Well, *I* am,” Klaus says brightly. “Do you think they’ll try waterboarding again? I really am thirsty.”

“Klaus, don’t -” Ben presses his lips together. “Don’t bait them so much.”

“But that’s my *favorite,*” he whines.

“And what happens when your high wears off?” Ben challenges. “When all of this isn’t so funny anymore?”

“Oh, they’ll probably have killed me by then!” Klaus assures him.

For some reason, this makes Ben glare at him more.

Then the menagerie comes back, and he gets rather distracted.

****

"Wow," Klaus says, grinning dazedly, "You Commission guys really know how to show a girl a good time."

"For *fuck's* sake!" Blue says. He sags like a deflated balloon, and goes back to the bed, nursing his knuckles.

"What do you know about The Commission?" Pinky demands. He can't see her face, but he flatters himself into thinking she looks frazzled.

Klaus blinks. "Your super-secret cosplay group? Plenty. Hey, do you just object to Five as a matter of course? I mean, I *get* it, he's *so annoying,* but I think I object to the lengths you're

going to. Mostly because they're inconveniencing me, honestly, I'm having a wonderful time but I did miss an appointment a while ago, so..."

"You mean a meeting with your dealer," Ben says flatly.

"He went rogue," Pinky snaps. "He knew the risks."

Klaus hums. "Yeah, but *I* never got to read this fine print of yours, so I think I should be declared free of all charges."

"Trust me, I'd *love* to wash my hands of you," Pinky says darkly.

"Then why not?" Klaus says. "I mean, if you still want to meet up later I can give you my number," or, like, the alleyway he usually frequents, same thing, "and we could schedule something...."

Pinky snorts. "Nice try. If I abandon a job, *I'd* be labeled rogue. Hell, that's probably what Number Five did."

"We don't know that," Blue pipes up from the bed. "Just that he and Raithe got a termination order, no stated reason."

"Oh, right, Raithe," Klaus says, taking note of the fact that apparently Pinky and Blue don't know about the incident Five is obsessing over. "What's the deal with him, anyways? My dear baby brother didn't elaborate much on him, I'm just *starved* for gossip."

"He's not a problem anymore," Pinky says brusquely.

"Says you," Blue mutters.

"Oh, for -" Pinky says exasperatedly, turning to look at Blue.

"I'm just saying!" Blue defends himself. "You know the rumors! How did they even kill him in the first place? And he was enhanced, too, you know what his abilities were! He could be in this very room and we'd never even know it."

"Raithe is not in the fucking room," Pinky says, appearing to summon an enormous amount of patience. "He's not anywhere, he's *dead.* He's dead and as soon as this *junkie,*" she slaps Klaus 'round the head, and he debates with himself whether to critique her name-calling skills, because seriously, out of all the epithets that have been hurled at him over the years *junkie* is one of the tamer ones, "tells us where Number Five is, so is he."

"As long as Raithe doesn't show up and kill us first," Blue mutters.

"He's *dead!*"

"Well, I'm not so sure that would slow him down very much!"

"Sounds like an interesting guy," Klaus observes, grimacing as he swallows yet more blood.

This utterance, however, brings their attention back to him. Oopsy. Ben shoots him an exasperated look as Pinky huffs.

"Yeah, well, he's irrelevant," she informs him. "And the rumors aren't true, anyways. He's not invincible, he's not immortal, and he isn't secretly hanging around right in front of us listening to us argue about him! He has *nothing* to do with the *job at hand,* which is finding out where the *fuck* Number Five is. You," she says to Blue, "get the pliers, we're trying fingernails."

Blue sighs, but gets up. Klaus grimaces, and prepares himself for another round.

****

Unfortunately, things start to go downhill about two hours later.

Because Ben's prediction comes true. The last time Klaus took anything was a while before his bath, close to half a day ago. He took some good drugs, and if he could just *get to his fucking coat* he could dose himself up again, but that's not exactly doable when he's tied to a fucking chair.

Pinky and Blue take another break and have a conference on the other side of the room. Klaus is proud of the fact that while his laughter has grown slightly more hysterical, he's still reacting disturbingly enough that they haven't slipped out of using the 'what is wrong with him' tone.

The fingernails were kind of hard to work with, he has to admit. He really had to stretch his acting ability on that one. There were a few moments where he wasn't sure they'd buy it, but Ben decided to be useful for once and held up bunny ears over Pinky's head. Klaus' genuinely incredulous wheezing and cries of "But she's a *dog!*" eventually managed to convince them he wasn't lying. Maybe cracking a bit, but not in the way they wanted, so they put a stop to the fingernails.

After that it was more punching and assorted attempts at things already tried (he did, actually, get another drink of water). It was all very fun, depending on your definition of fun.

They haven't brought up sexual torture yet. Probably figure he'd just enjoy it. He *has* been showing his hand a little, there.

But now he takes a shaky breath, and tries in vain to block out the babble coming from behind him.

"Withdrawal," Ben diagnoses, leaning against the shelf in front of him. There's the barest hint of sympathy in his eyes. "It's starting now, isn't it. It must be. Otherwise, who's the dead *babushka?*"

"I don't know," Klaus groans. The woman's voice is crystal clear in a way he hasn't heard in *years,* except from Ben. There's other voices, too, still muffled for now but steadily growing louder. Klaus squeezes his eyes shut to avoid seeing the flickers around him. "It's driving me crazy. The bitch won't *shut up!*"

“Hey!” Blue calls out. “Watch your mouth. And what did I say about eyes front!”

“Stay calm, Klaus,” Ben says.

Easy for him to say. Ben’s always been a strange ghost, from his appearance (*definitely* not what he looked like when he died) to his ability to push through the drugs (something Klaus vacillates on feeling grateful for, depending on the day) to his persistent awareness of the world (good thing, too, because if he’d devolved into some snarling, half-mad thing like most other ghosts Klaus would have put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger without hesitation).

Klaus is pretty sure his powers have something to do with all of that, pulling Ben closer to the land of the living than he would be otherwise. He’s clearheaded and remembers his entire life and can carry on a conversation for hours if he feels like it - honestly, aside from the invisible-and-intangible thing, Ben might as well be alive. It’s the one and only thing Klaus’ powers have ever done that he’s grateful for.

It has side-effects, though. Ben actually can’t see other ghosts as well as Klaus can, not unless Klaus gets far too close to sobriety. Right now, Klaus is willing to bet every pill in his coat pocket that Ben can only see the Russian woman standing behind him, not the crazed flickers jumping in and out of reality all over the rest of the room.

There are a lot of them. Klaus is getting an increasingly clear picture of his eventual fate, and it isn’t pretty.

So - yeah. Easy for Ben to stay calm.

Then Pinky and Blue come back over, and pick up his coat.

“Wait,” Klaus says. “Hey, hey, hey, that’s - that’s mine, that’s my personal stuff -”

“Oh, what do we have here,” Pinky says, pulling out -

- his pills.

“Let me see that,” Blue says. Pinky tosses it over.

No. No, no, no, not his pills, *please* not his pills, don’t make him go sober, please no -

“Hey, no no no no, be careful with that,” he wheedles, voice going higher than normal. “It's my - asthma medication.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” Blue says. He drops the pills on the floor and

stomp, stomp, stomp.

Klaus can hear himself shouting, pleading with them to *wait, stop, hold on,* but Blue just keeps at it, and Klaus slams his chair into the ground and *shouts* at them, almost as loud as the screaming all around him, the ghosts flickering madly, drawn in by another one of their members being made -

He tries bargaining, desperately. It doesn't work, of course it doesn't work, and despite his small, petty revenge that is the special chocolate being consumed he's well and thoroughly fucked and they all know it. Ben tries to tell him to *'stay strong, Klaus,'* but between the ever-louder screaming of the ghosts and his own roaring panic Klaus can barely hear him.

The pills are dangled in front of his face, and his body is *begging* for it even through the pain he's feeling and the ghosts are howling and guttering in and out like a disco ball and he just -

can't.

He tells them.

****

They put him in a closet.

If Klaus were in a more coherent frame of mind, he might make a joke about that. Something about *this* being an entirely new experience, because as far as he can remember he's never made a secret about his sexuality (maybe he should have, maybe then Five wouldn't think he's disgusting and come save him).

But he's not coherent right now, not in any frame of mind conducive to jokes, because the walls are pressing in on him and it's almost pitch black and *he can't even scream* -

Dad first put him in the mausoleum when he was eight. It was meant to get him used to the ghosts, to stop being scared by hacked-off limbs and hanging entrails and bloody, staring faces. It was meant to spur him into wanting to access more of his powers. It was meant to make him stronger.

At least, that's what Dad said.

Klaus is pretty sure Dad just decided to do something at random and see if it worked. All of his siblings have powers that are easy to train, easy to work out. How do you train 'seeing ghosts'?

Dad first put him in the mausoleum when he was eight.

He never really left.

Ben's talking. Ben's talking, and he grabs onto that with both hands, tries to focus on his brother's voice through the haze of screams (real and imagined) assaulting his ears. Ben is telling him to calm down, which is *really fucking helpful, gee, wish I though of that,* but Klaus manages to breathe. In and out, in and out. It's too rapid, but at least he's getting air.

And beneath the screaming, there's - something else?

Klaus racks his brains, but Ben pokes his head out and looks back in with a new light in his eyes. "It's a maid!"

Klaus starts screaming again. Louder, *louder,* as loud as he possibly fucking can. He's identified the faint sound now and he realizes it's a vacuum cleaner. Okay, he just has to scream louder than that.

But the minutes tick by, and no one opens the closet.

"She can't hear you," Ben says, frustrated. Klaus breathes heavily, and tries not to cry.

Soon enough, he can't keep screaming. There's blood trickling down his throat, and if he throws up he'll probably choke on it. He feels nauseous, lightheaded, like the world isn't real. Everything is spinning around him, screams reverberating through his head, the darkness clawing at his mind.

"You know the worst part about being dead?" Ben says, all of a sudden.

No, Ben. Klaus doesn't know, because it went over his head the last two dozen times you said it.

"You're stuck," Ben continues. "Nowhere to go, nowhere to change - that's the real torture, if you gotta know."

Considering Ben is thirteen years away from remembering what pain feels like, Klaus would beg to fucking differ. His fingernails - or the beds where they used to be, anyways - surge with pain again, and Klaus blinks away tears.

He's pretty sure Ben is just talking to try and keep him calm - or at least annoyed instead of panicking. They've had this argument dozens of times over the years, and he has to know that Klaus is fairly done with the whole thing.

And it's working, somewhat. Klaus can feel his heartbeat slowing - not anywhere close to normal, but it isn't jackhammering away in his ears anymore.

"Watching your brother take for granted everything you've lost, and pissing it all away."

Klaus sniffles, breathing raggedly, and looks back at Ben. Ben stares at him levelly.

The sentiment is genuine, he knows. Ben really does feel that way.

Klaus also knows that, even after all this time, Ben still doesn't quite get it.

Ben resents him for never trying to get sober. For, as he says, 'pissing it all away'. For being careless with his body, his mind, his life. Klaus has heard reprimand after reprimand, all relating back in some way to the fact that Klaus has what Ben would give anything to get back, and treats it like it's worthless.

He supposes it's because Ben liked his life. It wasn't great, no - not even decent, not with Dad and the Academy and bloody bits of people soaked into his clothes after every mission. But Ben liked his life with the kind of casual thoughtlessness Klaus has observed to be present in most people. He liked just - having it. He liked *living.*

Klaus wonders what that's like.

(Because even after all this time, what Ben doesn't quite realize is this:

Klaus knows he's thrown away his entire life. He just never wanted it in the first place.)

Chapter End Notes

I've always been super annoyed with Ben for ragging on Klaus when he's *in the middle of a panic attack,* but then I noticed it *did* get Klaus to calm down. So I'm hoping that was Ben's actual intention.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

No matter what anyone says, Five is not panicking. He's not.

Panicking would not be productive. Panicking would not let him think clearly. *Panicking* would not be helpful in assisting Five in his current mission to find Hazel and Cha-Cha and *render them into their subatomic parts for* ***daring to lay hands on his brother.***

So Five is not panicking. He is completely, utterly, and totally calm. It's like a freezing shroud laid over his thoughts, spiking through his veins. All he feels is ice.

"They'll be at a motel," Five says clinically, rolling out a map of the city. A telephone book sits on the table next to it. "Small, not particularly upscale. The sort of place that rents by the day but you wouldn't be surprised to hear rents by the hour. In a less reputable part of town, where people keep walking if they hear someone calling for help."

"Jesus christ," Luther says, looking pale. "You really think they'll - hurt him?"

Five looks at him.

"They have had him," he says slowly, making sure to enunciate each word. "For nearly *twelve hours.* I would be surprised if he was capable of *walking* by now."

Luther flinches back from the look on his face. Allison isn't much better.

Five doesn't care.

They didn't notice. They *didn't fucking notice* that Klaus was fucking *kidnapped.* Stolen right out of the house (from the bathroom, it looks like, his clothes still strewn on the floor) in the middle of a firefight. They didn't think to look for him afterwards, didn't even spare him a single *thought.*

Five realizes his hand is gripping the table so tightly his bones creak. He forces himself to let go, and flicks through the pages of the phone book. Doing so without ripping them is an exercise in self-control, but he manages.

"I'll put together a list of the most likely options," he says. "If Diego takes too long to get back we'll split the list in half, and start looking. If you find them, don't directly engage unless Klaus' life is in danger."

And *oh,* it hurts to say that. The thought of leaving Klaus in the hands of those fucking psychos for a *single second* longer than it takes to find him sends daggers through Five's heart. But Hazel and Cha-Cha are *good,* and if they fought his siblings to a draw he can't repeat that scenario when they have the upper hand. All it takes is one wrong move, and Klaus is dead.

Because of him.

Again.

Luther, however, protests. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, you can’t be serious.”

“If we find him, we’re going and saving him,” Allison says, straightening, steel in her words.

“Oh, so you’ve magically become capable of defeating them in the last twelve hours?” Five says, looking between them and baring his teeth. “With Klaus as a hostage, this time? Your incompetence got him kidnapped, I’m not letting it interfere with getting him back alive.”

“There was - there was a lot going on, Five,” Allison protests feebly, flicking a glance at Luther.

“I don’t care,” Five hisses, smacking his hand on the table and glaring them down. They both flinch back, and a vicious curl of satisfaction shoots through him. “You didn’t check on him, you didn’t even *think* to. For all you knew he could have been shot by stray fire and left to bleed out one floor away from your stupid fucking petty post-fight squabble *and don’t tell me there wasn’t one.* There’s a very large chance he’ll be dead by the time we find him, and that’s entirely because *you* forgot he *exists.*”

He glares at them for another few seconds, but they have the sense to look ashamed, and don’t try to defend themselves further.

Five resumes his search.

It takes longer than he’d like to complete the list. Of course, anything that takes longer than ‘right this fucking second’ is intolerable at the moment. Five grits his teeth and attempts to write faster. It fails only because he’s already writing as fast as he can.

By the time the list is complete, Diego isn’t back yet, so they divide it in two. Five briefly swings by Diego's room. There's a body there, a couple days dead by the smell. Irrelevant. Five swipes one of Diego's knives and leaves. Meanwhile, Luther leaves a message at Diego’s place, and they leave another one with Pogo to give to him whenever he decides to show up.

During the course of this, they discover Grace’s corpse. Hazel and Cha-Cha really did a number on her - her arm is torn open, and there are several bullet holes through her body.

Five does feel upset about that. Really, he does. But Grace was going to die anyways, and if they don’t *move* Klaus is going to join her. He pulls Luther and Allison away as quickly as possible, and all but drags them out of the Academy (with only one arm, he can’t pull both of them, so he elects to be smart and tugs on Allison. Luther follows like an oversized puppy).

With another reiteration to *wait* if they find Klaus on their own, he leaves them.

Five briefly thinks of Vanya, before pushing her out of his mind. To be perfectly frank, she couldn’t really help much. And the thought of putting her in the vicinity of Hazel and Cha-

Cha makes his stomach curdle. He already has nightmarish visions of Klaus being tortured dancing through his head, he's not sure what he would do if they got her too.

Well. Actually. He's *pretty* sure that if they both died, he'd just curl up and wait for the apocalypse.

So he's going to just. Avoid bringing Vanya anywhere near this.

Five takes a deep breath, and begins his search.

****

Bothering to ask the front desk clerk at any of the motels is for people who can't teleport (the thought occurs to him that Allison might not actually use her rumors to help the search. He resolves that if this slows things down, he will put her in a coma to avoid her stupidity from hurting anyone else until the apocalypse has blown over). Creating a distraction to draw away the clerk is simple enough, and he can look through the registry without interruption.

Even going to the motels in order of most likely, he still doesn't find Klaus at any of the first four. Five digs his nails into his leg and stares out the window of his taxi. The clock is ticking, and despite the fact that it's the first time he actually *knows* there's a clock it's still running down on him.

He can't fail Klaus again. The apocalypse - he didn't know about it, couldn't have known, but he left Klaus and all his siblings behind out of pure hubris, and they paid the price. The equations - he *should* have known, should have figured it out, no matter what Delores says he's not going to ever fully believe that wasn't his fault. And this - if he kept better tabs on the Academy while he was doing his stakeout, if he resisted the siren call of Delores, if he just fucking *thought,* then none of this would have happened.

It takes a special kind of fuck-up to get their brother killed *three fucking times.*

He's not dead, Five tells himself, gripping his leg harder. *He's not dead. He's not, he's not, he's* ***not -***

His eye catches on smoke rising above the buildings.

He almost dismisses it.

Then he blinks and turns his head around, because he's not in the apocalypse anymore and fires aren't common. They're caught and put out before they grow too big, but from the look of the smoke trail this one is enormous. Five stares at it, wavering and growing in the sky, and he can faintly hear the sirens. It seems it's only a few blocks away. The taxi keeps rolling, passing by the street signs, and Five sees one.

And

his

heart

stops

beating.

He's jumping before he even realizes, and it's a *bitch* to do that from a moving vehicle but he rolls to dissipate the momentum and comes up running. He jumps again, not to the fire but to a specific place, but if he's right then they're one and the same -

- and as heat washes over his skin, orange-red sending streams of smoke into the air, he realizes that he was, indeed, right.

MeriTech burns in front of him, the massive building completely engulfed in flames. There's no way it was anything but purposeful, no way it was anyone but Hazel and Cha-Cha.

No way it was anyone but Klaus who told them.

"No," Five whispers. "No, please, no."

The words are swallowed up by the flames.

Five falls to his knees, staring blankly at the building.

Klaus broke. He broke, and told them - probably everything, all they need to track Five down, all they need to ensure the apocalypse goes off without a hitch. He broke, they broke him, and now they don't need him anymore.

He's probably already dead.

Five realizes, distantly, that tears are trickling down his face.

Klaus is dead.

Five's only clue is ash.

He has *nothing.*

Five slowly, mechanically gets to his feet. He feels distant from his own body, as if he's puppeting it from very far away. He turns around.

And he sees his van.

There's - something? Something on the front window, like some sort of dust. Five blinks at it. He's not curious (he can't actually feel much of anything at the moment), but he walks over to see.

Then he stops, stock still, in the middle of the street.

And then he's *jumping* over, faster than light, faster than thought, and he stares at the words written on the van and feels a supernova *explode* into being under his skin, whiting out his

vision, making him gasp for breath at the sheer crash of *rage* that fills him, looking at those words, *taunting him* -

There's a matchbook.

Five stops.

Steps closer.

He reaches out, and

picks

up

the

matchbook.

And, very, very slowly, it dawns on him that Klaus is not dead after all.

****

He cannot get this wrong.

It's as simple as that.

Five finds the clerk infuriatingly oblivious to any distractions, so eventually he just gets choked into unconsciousness. Finding Hazel and Cha-Cha in the registry is quite simple.

He jumps into the room directly below theirs. Methodically, he familiarizes himself with the layout. Two beds, bathroom, a few corners. Fairly small.

Five spends nearly ten minutes coming up with several scenarios he might be greeted with when he jumps into the above room. Klaus will certainly be near the middle of the room, in the most vulnerable position possible. It will force Five into having to look out for him in the fight, distract him from using his full abilities for fear of him getting caught in the crossfire.

Hazel and Cha-Cha….he turns around slowly, assessing their likely positions. He'll have to hit the rearmost one first, whoever that turns out to be. Draw both of their attention away from Klaus. But that opens up the possibility of a hostage situation, with the other one closer to his brother.

Five grimaces. He'll have to risk it, trust that he can jump faster than they can get to Klaus. It doesn't make him happy, but he can't forget that he's still injured. He needs to end this *fast.*

Taking one last look around the room, Five closes his eyes. He breathes in. Breathes out.

Once more.

Opens his eyes.

Knife in hand, he *jumps.*

And then, in one crystal clear moment, he realizes that he miscalculated.

"- so *grateful* to you -" Klaus is saying, tied to a chair in the middle of the room, just like he thought.

But instead of being where Five expects them, Hazel and Cha-Cha are standing right next to Klaus, looking down at him, scowls on their faces, guns held loosely in hand.

And then Klaus cuts off, and gapes at Five.

Hazel and Cha-Cha whirl around, and Cha-Cha has just enough time to shout out *"Shit!"* before Five attacks.

Shit shit ***shit,*** he needs to recover, he needs to kill them *now* -

He jumps and slashes at Hazel, who jerks back just quickly enough to avoid getting his throat slit. Five doesn't waste a beat, and kicks off the man's chest towards Cha-Cha. She brings her gun up quickly enough that it goes off nearly next to his ear, leaving him with nothing but a ringing sound from that side.

His knife catches her in the shoulder, though, cutting deep and severing at least a couple important muscles. Going off more instinct than observation, Five jumps five feet back from his current position.

It's a smart decision, because Hazel plows into Cha-Cha instead of him, sending them crashing to the floor. Five darts forward, and as he passes by Klaus' chair he lashes with the knife. The half-desperate swipe opens up a cut along Klaus' wrist, but the bonds fall away, and Klaus yanks his hand up.

Trusting his brother to free himself the rest of the way and get out of the line of fire, Five doesn't slow in his run at Hazel and Cha-Cha.

They're *fast,* though, and he only barely manages to avoid a sweep of Hazel's leg. Five stabs his knife down and only succeeds in hitting the fabric of his pants, pinning it to the floor. Then Cha-Cha fires again, and he has to dodge away from his knife, *shit.*

Klaus is scrambling out of the chair. Five ignores him.

Cha-Cha lunges at him, and he jumps behind her to send a fast jab at her neck. Hazel reaches out for him and grabs onto his wrist more out of chance than skill and *yanks* -

Five is reminded that Hazel is enhanced (superhuman stamina, superhuman strength, can go toe-to-toe with Luther) as his wrist makes a *cracking* noise before he manages to jump away. Almost certainly broken. Fuck.

He can't afford himself slack, though. Hazel yanks the knife from the floor and rushes at him. Five ducks low, and dodges to the side, then jumps once more. The positioning is tricky, and the ceiling is low for it, but he can't afford to play it safe.

Five appears on top of Hazel's shoulders and *throws* his weight backward. Hazel overbalances immediately, and Five jumps off an instant before he hits the floor. The gun clatters out of Hazel's hand.

Lightning-quick, Five *snatches* up the gun a moment before Hazel does -

- and shoots him right between the eyes.

Hazel falls, expression of shock on his face that always seems to come with death, but Five can't spare him another thought. He jumps back across the room, gun at the ready -

But Cha-Cha isn't behind him, now in his line of fire. Instead she's over next to the bed, near the air vent, between the window and the bed. She's bleeding from her shoulder, and from her temple where she smacked against the ground. She's staring at him with naked, open hatred.

Holding a gun to Klaus' head.

The room freezes.

Five stares.

He didn't focus on Klaus' appearance when he came in. Couldn't, not with how fast everything went. But now his eyes flick over his brother, cataloguing every single detail.

Klaus looks….awful. He's covered in sweat and blood and bruises, wearing nothing but a dirty towel, fine tremors running through him that have Cha-Cha gripping his shoulder to keep him still. There's a drawn, terrified look in his eye that has Five recognizing with a jolt, because it's the same one his Klaus had those first couple jobs, before he learned to banish ghosts. Withdrawal, then, on top of everything else.

Klaus coughs in the silence. It's a harsh sound, with a slight rattle that hints at possible internal damage.

Five feels very….distant, looking at it all.

"One move, and I blow his brains out," Cha-Cha says, her words cutting through the tension in the air. Her eyes are dark, soulless pits, staring him down.

Five's wrist and torso pulse in time with his heartbeat. The ringing in his ear still hasn't gone away. He has to work to make his tongue cooperate.

"Like I did to your partner?" he says.

Cha-Cha's eyes grow even harder, and she lets go of Klaus' shoulder to jam a finger into one of the larger bruises on his torso. Klaus makes a breathless, gasping noise.

Mechanically, Five unlocks his jaw. He tastes blood.

"Here's what's going to happen," Cha-Cha says. "You're going to put your gun down."

“Am I,” Five says.

“Yeah,” Cha-Cha says. “Or else your brother dies.”

He looks at Klaus, sucking in shaky breaths. His brother’s eyes are wide, staring at him.

Five can’t watch him die again. He *can’t.*

But Cha-Cha doesn’t know that.

“You really didn’t do your research, did you?” he says, keeping his voice flat. It’s easy, looking at Klaus’ injuries, feeling the ice curling inside him.

“What?” Cha-Cha says, caught off-guard.

“Out of all my siblings, killing him would have the least effect. By a *wide* margin.” Five says.

It is, technically, true. If Klaus dies, there’s nothing stopping him from coming back as a ghost and learning to do all the things his future-self did. Aside from leaving a body, Klaus dying would have negligible effect on his daily life in the long run.

Five neglects to mention the effect it would have on *him,* but really, that doesn’t matter.

Cha-Cha blinks. She glances down at Klaus. “Jesus christ,” she says, almost to herself. “You really weren’t kidding.”

Klaus is still, now, staring at Five with an unidentifiable expression.

Cha-Cha glances back up at Five, and then -

- for a single second -

- her gun moves slightly.

And Five *jumps.*

A gun goes off, his or hers, he can’t tell, as he crashes into her from behind. They fall to the floor, and Five fires into her back, but she throws him off, and then -

- Klaus starts screaming.

Five’s head *snaps* around and -

- there’s blood, too much blood, he’s bleeding, he’s *shot* -

- Klaus falls to the floor and -

“Love you, Five.”

Five

snaps.

****

Five cannot remember the next several seconds.

There are - snippets. Flashes.

Screaming.

Blood.

Pain.

Nothing concrete.

He can't recall anything else.

He doesn't really care to try.

****

Five staggers to his feet.

There's something underneath him. It's wet, and squishy, and it's dressed in something that might have been a suit, once.

Five ignores it. It's not important.

He staggers to the side, and looks -

- at Klaus, wide-eyed, holding his hands over a wound in his arm that's bleeding profusely but not dangerously, staring at him in stark, sheer terror.

Five stares back.

"Oh," he says, faintly. "You're okay."

Klaus swallows, jerkily. He makes a vaguely panicked noise. His eyes dart between Five and the thing on the floor.

Five can't really be bothered to translate that into something comprehensible. He sits himself on the bed, and closes his eyes.

He sits there for a while.

Eventually, he hears Klaus creeping closer. He doesn't make a move to indicate he hears anything.

"So," Klaus says at last, slightly unsteadily. "Thanks for coming, I guess."

Five takes a deep breath.

“Why do you do this,” Five whispers, not opening his eyes. “Why the fuck do you keep *doing this.* You fucking *idiot.*”

Klaus doesn’t answer.

After another minute, Five hears Klaus stirring. “Right,” he says, shakily. “Well, I guess we get to pawn their stuff now.”

Klaus crawls around the room, pausing to tie a towel around his arm. He then pokes around, collecting various objects and discarding others. Five declines to participate, staying on the bed, eyes still closed.

Then Klaus comes in near the nook again. “Hm,” he says, and bends down near Cha-Cha’s body. There’s the soft *squeak* of metal-on-metal, and Five remembers the air vent was half-removed during the standoff. Klaus was probably trying to escape the room that way.

“Well, look at this. Think it has cash?”

Five debates opening his eyes, and eventually, reluctantly does so.

Only to see Klaus fiddling with *a fucking Briefcase.*

“No!”

The word rips out of Five’s throat before he can stop it, and Klaus jerks up, eyes huge, and his hand slips on the catches -

- and Five *jumps,* faster than he ever has before -

but

he

isn’t

quite

fast

enough.

The familiar flash of light *(silver-blue, flickering madly, “Love you, Five”)* engulfs the room and

for the *third time*

Five fails his brother.

Chapter End Notes

You guys: Please let Klaus meet Dave! And let him get rescued! And don't traumatize Five any further!
Me: I can hit two out of three.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So.

Apparently, he found a time machine.

Apparently, it has terrible safety features.

Apparently, he's now in the *Vietnam fucking War.*

Klaus sits, dressed in ill-fitting army fatigues, the time machine *(what the fuck)* stowed under the seat of the bus currently transporting him to who-knows-where.

He keeps a hand pressed over the bullet wound in his right arm. It's not bad, as bullet wounds go - missed any major veins, through-and-through, didn't hit bone. As clean as possible, considering the gun was previously pointed at his head. Klaus managed to grab an extra shirt to replace the dirty towel while he was getting into the fatigues, and now he thinks it might have stopped bleeding already. Maybe.

The rest of his wounds are still clamoring for attention, though. His entire body hurts, withdrawal compounding the state of his injuries. He's shaking, badly, keeping steady pressure on the bullet hole through willpower alone.

And there are *so many ghosts.*

Klaus might not be able to tell the difference between living and dead. He's mostly sober, and apparently that translates to 'completely fucked' when he's suddenly thrown into an active warzone. The bus is packed with far more soldiers than it can hold, people phasing in and out of each other, the crashing swell of voices only rising in volume with every second that passes.

Even then, it's preferable to the ones they're passing. Klaus doesn't look out the window, staring straight ahead, but from the corner of his eye he can see *quite* a few more ghosts lining the road. They're screaming, most of them, mingled faces of Americans and Vietnamese, brought equal in the shared suffering death brings.

A hand lands on his shoulder.

Klaus nearly jumps out of his skin, and just managed to suppress a yelp. He twists to look behind him to see….the guy who saw him teleport into his tent and land right next to his bed. Right.

Fuck.

"Just get into the country?" the man says.

Klaus has to replay the words in his mind, wondering if he misheard. It's entirely possible - probable, even, considering the din that surrounds him. But the noise isn't *quite* loud enough to drown out real voices (not yet, anyways), and Klaus has to conclude that the man who saw him materialize half-naked next to his bed is really asking him that.

Okay. The guy did look half-asleep. Maybe he thinks he imagined it.

"Oh. Uh, yeah." Klaus replies eloquently. Cut him some slack, he was just kidnapped, tortured, shot, and *vwooped* into an active warzone.

The man gives a wry smile. Klaus suddenly wonders if he actually was as asleep as he looked.

But all he says is, "Yeah, shit's crazy, I know."

"Yeah," Klaus says hurriedly, because if Mystery Man isn't going to bring up the time-traveller in the room then he sure as fuck isn't.

"You'll adjust," the man says, glancing around. He refocuses on Klaus. "I'm Dave."

He holds out a hand. Klaus suddenly notices that Dave is very handsome.

"Klaus," he says, taking the hand and nudging the time machine further under his seat.

They smile at each other, before Dave releases Klaus' hand. His heat lingers on Klaus' skin.

No. No, no, no, *bad* hormones. Do *not* get a crush on a soldier in the 60's, he'd probably *shoot you.*

"So," Klaus says abruptly, clearing his throat. "Dave. I hesitate to ask, but is there somewhere I can get a little….pick-me-up?"

Because if he doesn't get some drugs in his system again soon, he's going to crash. Spectacularly. It won't be pretty, and Klaus suspects that in his current situation it would be deadly.

Dave tilts his head. Klaus suppresses his panic. Asking for drugs is probably a no-no in the middle of a warzone, but surely it's not an entirely new concept. The 60's were practically soaked with drugs. Flower children and hippies and shit, right? It's not like he's propositioning anyone.

"Uh, sure," Dave says, a touch bemused. "You out? I have a bit on me, you can have that." He fishes around a pocket and holds out a few small, white pills. He grins. "Just make sure to return the favor, okay?"

Klaus stares at him. Then at the pills.

He takes them and swallows them down, and grins back.

"Dave," he says. "I think this is the start of a beautiful friendship."

****

“Jesus christ, Klaus,” Dave says, trying to hold back a laugh and failing miserably. “Did you even go through basic?”

Klaus sets down the gun and raises an eyebrow. “Oh, Dave, I think you know the answer to that.”

They’re on the edge of camp, in a spot close enough to be safe but separate enough to give the illusion of seclusion. Dave pulled him to it and confessed that he’d noticed Klaus had some trouble in combat, and he wanted to help. It’s sweet, but then Dave is very sweet in general.

(Sadly, Klaus doesn’t know if that’s literal. He deserves a medal for not trying to find out, seriously.)

Klaus is high enough that Ben would be shooting him with his entire arsenal of Disapproving Looks (numbers one through fourteen), especially since he’s handling deadly weaponry. But Klaus couldn’t give a flying fuck about that. The ghosts are numerous enough that even three months into never being less high than he is now, there are still flickers in his vision and a low, pitched murmuring in his ears.

Dave bites his lip, and looks at Klaus from the corner of his eye. “...Yeah, guess I do,” he says.

They’ve been dancing around the topic of Klaus’ arrival for months now, but never openly broached the subject. Klaus has seen Dave give aside glances to the briefcase under his bed, but he hasn’t brought it up. Klaus wonders if he’s going to now.

Klaus has poked at the briefcase a couple times (with a *very* long stick) over the past few months, and he still has no idea how to work it. There’s always the option of throwing caution to the wind and flipping it open, but he has *no* idea what that would do. Maybe nothing, maybe drop him into an even worse situation than this.

Dad always did say he was a coward. Klaus never really paid attention, he heard it so many times, but he has to admit the old goatfucker might have had a point.

He shifts uncomfortably, and wonders if he’s going to have to lie to Dave. He doesn’t really want to do that.

But all Dave does is turn back to the gun. “So, I at least hope you know where the safety is.”

“Yeah, yeah, course I do.” Dad’s training was a while ago, and his memory is slightly spotty from the decades of drug abuse, but he can at least remember that much.

Dave grins at him, and Klaus’ stomach does a backflip. He pushes it away. He can *ignore it,* he absolutely can.

“Alright,” Dave reaches out. “First thing you want to do is keep it functional, which means stripping it.”

Scratch that. He absolutely can't ignore it, not when Dave starts saying things like *that.*

The next hour or so is deeply, *unfairly* erotic. Assembling a gun has no right to be this sexy. Dave doesn't seem to have a problem with keeping it in his pants, which means it's probably just Klaus who keeps slipping into seeing the entire situation as a setup for a porno.

He hasn't had sex in *three months,* okay, sue him.

"Klaus," Dave says, in that stupidly smooth voice of his. "Are you okay?"

"What? Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Why do you ask?" Klaus shifts and hopes he can hide that he's getting a bit revved up. If Dave would just stop *holding his gun* like that -

"You're trying to put a rock where the firing pin should be," Dave points out mildly.

Klaus looks down. "Oh."

"Seriously, are you okay?" Dave sets down the gun, which would be fucking excellent if he didn't then proceed to *put his hand on Klaus' shoulder.* "You know we're going to Saigon next week for R&R, you can unwind there if you're tense."

Oh *dear sweet lord.*

"I'm fine," Klaus says, which would probably be much more convincing if it didn't come out in a strangled squeak.

Dave frowns, and even *that* makes him look stupidly beautiful. "I don't think you are," he says. "Klaus, what's *wrong?*"

"Nothing's wrong!"

"Yes there *is,*" Dave insists. "Klaus, I just want you to be okay, I care about you, I -"

Dave cuts himself off, and goes pale.

Klaus blinks at him.

Suddenly, he realizes Dave has kept a hand on his shoulder for some time now.

Dave coughs abruptly, and draws back. "I'm just worried," he says, not looking Klaus in the eye. He gathers his gun. "But, uh, if you want some space, that's fine. See you around."

He's gone before Klaus can reply.

Klaus blinks again, and looks at his shoulder. Slowly, he brings up a hand and brushes against the place where Dave held on. It's still warm.

Huh.

Maybe his crush isn't so hopeless after all.

****

They go to Saigon, and as he finds out….

It's not.

****

Klaus giggles to himself.

"What's so funny?" Dave asks, sounding pretty amused himself.

Klaus snuggles in closer to him. "Nothing," he says, and giggles again. "Everything."

"Am I included in that?"

"But of course," Klaus says, and stretches up to give him a long, slow kiss.

They take their time with it, even though it's entirely possible someone might decide to come into the tent. Johnson and Connery are on perimeter duty, anyways, so they have as much guarantee of privacy as they'll ever get.

They break off the kiss, eventually, and Klaus snuggles back into Dave's chest. They're sadly wearing far too many clothes, but he can deal. In fact, it's kind of….nice, to just hold each other like this. Klaus can't remember the last time he did that with any of his flings.

Then again, this might not actually be a fling. This is the longest relationship he's ever been in, and isn't that just sad when it's only been six weeks? But Dave hasn't grown tired of him yet, hasn't even grown really annoyed with him. They've argued once or twice, sure, but to Klaus' surprise Dave sat him down and they talked until they worked it through. This must be that 'healthy communication' thing he's heard so much about.

Klaus hums, and closes his eyes. With Dave's arms around him, he feels almost….safe.

"What are you thinking about?" Dave asks, quietly.

"Eennngh," Klaus draws out. "What's for dinner tonight, tomorrow's patrols, how much I love you." He grins up at Dave, winking on the last one.

Dave is quiet, looking down at him.

"I love you, too," he says, softly.

Klaus jerks in his grip and stares, eyes huge. He feels *wide* awake all of a sudden.

"What," he breathes. He's surprised he can manage that much.

Dave flushes a light rose-pink color, but he doesn't look away. "I - I know it's a bit early," he says. "Probably. But. I do. I love you."

Klaus stares, speechless.

He's….never heard that before.

Not for real. It's been tossed at him a few times, bubbling with laughter and insincerity, and he's always been okay with that because he's never been much better, making it into a joke that always gets a laugh. It's simpler to present it that way. He *does* love people, he's never actually lied when he said it before, but Klaus knows himself and he knows he loves easy. A pill, a fuck, a smile, and he's gone.

And as easy as it is for him to love people, he knows it's just as hard for people to love him back.

He thinks of Diego, his reprimands growing sharper and his face growing more and more pinched every time Klaus ended up in the emergency room. He thinks of Ben, sympathy evaporating and frustration doubling and tripling until that's all he can muster in response to anything.

He thinks of Five, face blank and eyes flat, saying he doesn't care if Klaus dies.

Klaus stares at Dave, waiting for - for him to laugh, break out into a grin, chuckle and say *'Oh, man, your **face**'*, the inevitable sneer and rolled eyes and condescending look. Waiting for the punchline (it's him, it's always him).

But Dave doesn't. He keeps staring, face solemn, and Klaus realizes, dizzily, impossibly -

- he *means* it.

"Oh," Klaus says. *"Oh."*

****

Klaus is in the middle of an active warzone. Every day brings a very real possibility that he'll be killed, or crippled, or have to kill or cripple others. He has to take a fuckload of drugs to keep himself grounded in reality, to stave off the thousands and thousands of ghosts that swirl around him like a hurricane. He's been called slurs more times than he can count, annoys people so much he's half-certain he'll be tagged with friendly fire one of these days, and hasn't worn a skirt in *months.*

He's also happier he can ever remember being.

He hums into Dave's neck, and can't help giggling when Dave grunts and tries to shift away. Discovering that Dave is ticklish ranks as one of his greatest achievements in life. He noses in deeper.

"Klaus," Dave complains.

"Yes, darling?" Klaus says, pulling back and batting his eyelashes.

Dave *really* should not have admitted he has a weakness for Klaus' eyes. He gets distracted, gazing into them. Klaus luxuriates in it. No one's ever looked at him like that before. Like he's beautiful, like he's worth something. He'd almost given up ever trying to be.

“How are you so perfect,” Dave groans, letting his head thump back onto the pillow.

That startles a laugh out of Klaus. “You’re really bringing out the big guns today, Dave,” he says, grinning. “Been practicing your sweet-talk?”

“No, I mean it,” Dave insists, looking down at Klaus. “I don’t know *where* you came from, but I’m just - I’m so glad you’re here. I couldn’t imagine falling for anyone else, not now that I know you.”

Klaus blinks up at him, caught off-guard. Something in his stomach turns over.

Klaus knows himself quite well, can recite an entire laundry list of all his attributes from most to least desirable, and *perfect* has never made it on there. Klaus is very, very selfish, he knows, selfish enough to hoard all of Dave’s love like a miser, treasuring each compliment until they’re worn smooth, but this one is just too much.

“I’m -” he says, fumbling with the words. “I’m not perfect, Dave. Not even close.”

Dave’s eyes are unbearably soft. “You are to me.”

Klaus swallows. Then he swallows again.

“Okay,” he says. He ducks his head down again to lay on Dave’s chest. “Okay. Sure.”

Dave puts a hand on his back. Klaus closes his eyes, and - it *hurts.* Why does it hurt to feel loved? Why didn’t anyone warn him?

“I’ll convince you one day,” Dave murmurs into his hair. “Just you watch.”

****

One week later, Klaus tells him about The Academy, his siblings, the motel, the briefcase. The future. He waits, forcing himself not to shake, braced for denial and disbelief.

Dave takes his hand and kisses the palm (hello). Then he keeps going, on to every single one of his scars, even the ones from before the motel.

“I believe you,” he whispers. “I believe you.”

Klaus hasn’t ever heard that before, either.

****

There’s blood on his hands.

Klaus staggers through camp in a daze. He doesn’t know how he got back. Doesn’t know what’s happening. People blur around him, and he doesn’t know if they’re alive or dead. He doesn’t care.

There’s blood on his hands.

He stumbles, almost falls over. His breathing is harsh in his ears. He pulls himself up, because there's no one next to him to do it for him. No hand on his shoulder, no warmth against his side, no voice whispering reassurances in his ear.

There's just the dog tags hung around his neck, and the blood on his hands.

Klaus feels wetness on his cheeks, and he thinks it might be tears. He's floating, distant from his own body, watching himself move through camp like a ghost.

Maybe he is one.

Without conscious input, his feet take him to his tent. He lifts up the flap (his hands leaves smears on the canvas) and goes inside. Dave's bed is still unmade. He stares at it. It looks empty without Dave, without him, without the two of them curled up under the blanket, together.

His feet take him past Dave's bed, and he almost protests. He should - he should lie down. Maybe if he does Dave will come back, get in next to him, throw an arm around his waist and hold him close.

He doesn't.

Instead, he goes over to his own bed, kneels down, and pulls out the briefcase.

He stares at it.

He could end up anywhere. A slave market, the World Wars, any of the thousands of massacres humans have inflicted on each other over the past several millennia. There's no telling where opening it could take him.

Klaus is hard-pressed to care.

Without hesitation, he flips the latches, opens the briefcase, and -

- once again -

- the world erupts with blue light.

Chapter End Notes

....sorry.

Chapter 16

Five is staring at the wall.

It's not a particularly interesting wall. Bland and boring. If he was in the mood to draw comparisons, he'd say it's almost as boring as the walls back at the Facility.

He's not up for something so intensive as thinking right now, though, so instead he just - sits. And stares.

His room is unchanged from the day he ran away, if slightly tidier. Maybe. It's been over twenty years, so his memory is a little fuzzy. But there's still the scribbles on several of the walls, still his uniforms hung in the closet, still textbooks on the shelves.

If he doesn't look down at the stump of his arm, he might almost be able to convince himself he's thirteen again. That the past twenty-two years were nothing but a dream, and any moment now he'll hear Mom ringing the bell for breakfast, his siblings' light steps running down the hall. All seven of them, together. He can almost see it.

Almost.

Five isn't sure how he managed to get back home. He probably teleported a couple times, because his side is a mess of blood, staining most of his shirt and a large percentage of his pants, now crusty and dried. Every breath sends sharp knives of pain through his torso, befitting of a gunshot wound that's been badly abused several times over the past few days.

He barely feels it.

Delores sits on the bed a few feet away from him. She stopped trying to talk to Five hours ago. Now she's just sitting in silence with him. He appreciates that, as much as he can appreciate anything right now.

He's not sure what time it is, or how much time has passed since - since. He's fairly sure it doesn't matter.

Nothing really matters, anymore.

It occurs to him, after - some time - that he Allison and Luther are likely still out looking. Possibly Diego too, if he got their messages. Five should tell them that they can stop searching. Klaus is somewhere they won't ever be able to find him, scattered across some random spot in history, confused and injured. There's a decent chance he died within days-hours-minutes of his arrival.

And if not, it doesn't make much of a difference. Klaus has no idea how to operate a Briefcase. They're made to be as cryptic as possible, to prevent just anyone from meddling with them. There's a miniscule chance that it was set for a round trip, but Five doubts it. No, the possibility of Klaus figuring out how to come back is approximately nil.

The best Five can hope for - in a way that doesn't muster any hope at all, because he's fresh out - is that Klaus landed on his feet, wherever he ended up. That he recovered from being thrown into an unfamiliar time period, likely an unfamiliar country, among unfamiliar people. That he managed to build a life for himself there. That he lived to a ripe old age, maybe met someone, maybe got clean, maybe had a family.

That maybe, just maybe, he was happy.

Five holds that image in his mind for one brief, shining moment, before it gutters out and he's left holding nothing but ashes.

He continues staring at the wall.

****

It's some time later (hours? He doesn't know, and doesn't care) when he hears a noise.

It's faint, coming from down the hall. It takes him several minutes to recognize it as running water. In the bathroom, the one Klaus was taken from.

Five wonders if he should be angry about that. Upset. Shouldn't he be having emotions? Klaus always handled his tantrums with perfect (if deeply exasperated) aplomb, but he only got genuinely *worried* when Five shut down. It probably means that's bad.

Klaus called those times 'depressive episodes', and pored over quite a few textbooks to be capable of handling them right. Five was never sure if he should be offended about that, especially when Klaus took away the alcohol, but he has to admit that he *did* recover faster than he would have otherwise.

Especially when Klaus would hold Five and chatter for hours, usually about some probably-fictional-but-if-not-then-definitely-illegal escapade during his drug days, acting out Ben's exasperated but occasionally enabling comments. It was hard to stay detached when picturing that ridiculous statue in the courtyard sporting a live octopus glued to the chest.

The sound of running water stops.

Five tries to summon the energy to decide whether he should go and check who it is. He doubts it's Pogo, and everyone else should be gone. Or dead.

He doesn't manage to summon enough, though, and continues sitting where he is.

It isn't until twenty minutes later when he finally pulls himself to his feet and trudges out the door. It's not out of any sort of interest or curiosity. It's simply….something to do. He's not even sure why he's bothering, considering nothing he does matters, but he does it regardless. Probably out of inertia.

The person is gone from the bathroom by the time he gets there. The water is still in the tub. It's grimy and clouded, sediment settled at the bottom. A trail of wet footprints leads down the hallway.

To….Klaus' room.

Five follows them.

The door is half-ajar. Five carefully placed his hand against it, feather-light, ignoring the twinge from his wrist. He can hear movement from inside, faint breaths and the occasional *clink* of metal.

Slowly, Five pushes the door open.

Klaus looks over at him.

He's wearing dog tags, Five notices. That's what the sound of metal is. They swing around his neck, clacking against each other as he moves. Five can't quite see how worn they are from here, but Klaus seems well-used to their weight.

The tattoo on his left arm is new-but-not, as well. Some sort of emblem or symbol, done entirely in black and taking up a good part of his bicep. Klaus is at an angle where Five can't read the words twining above the image.

Klaus is tanner, and has put on some muscle. His fingers twitch and curl in on themselves, as if grasping at something he has to constantly remind himself isn't there. He twitches occasionally, that full-body itch crying out for attention, and his eyes blink slower than normal thanks to the jet lag.

"Oh," Klaus says, his voice much flatter than normal. He finishes pulling the shirt over his head. "It's you."

Five wonders, idly, if he's hallucinating.

"It's me," he agrees, because there's no reason not to be polite, real or not. See, Klaus, he *can* have manners. "Just got back?"

Klaus looks over at him, eyes half-lidded. There's a look of deep, raw pain in them. "Yeah," he says at last.

His hand creeps up to clasp the dog tags. He closes his eyes and sways on his feet.

"You know," Klaus says, his voice several shades too far into 'shaky' to come off as casual. "You could have mentioned that standard field gear for those Commission people includes a time machine. Maybe explained how to work one, even, that would have been helpful."

He should have told them about Briefcases, yes. Maybe it wouldn't have stopped Klaus from getting sucked away, but maybe it would have. At the very least, Five should have wondered where Hazel and Cha-Cha put theirs. Instead he just….sat. Useless.

"I'm sorry," Five says.

Klaus blinks at him. His eyes skitter to his right, where Five assumes Ben is, then back to Five.

“Well,” he says at last. “Never thought I’d hear that.”

Five never thought he’d get to say it. Not to Klaus’ face, anyways. There’s still a high chance that he’s hallucinating and he still won’t ever be able to.

“Do you still have it?” Five asks after a moment. “The Briefcase?”

Because if he does, Five knows how to use it. He can go back and - well. He doubts he’ll be able to fix things. He’s lost that faith in himself, if he ever even had it in the first place. But Klaus would want him to try.

“No,” Klaus says, letting out a short, ugly laugh. “It exploded.”

Five nods placidly. Of course. Having it would make things far too simple. He’s not sure whether this makes it more or less probable that he’s hallucinating, because Briefcases are built to be *hardy* but something going his way is almost laughable, at this point.

“I see,” he says. Then, more because he wants to keep hearing Klaus’ voice than any real curiosity, “How long were you gone?”

Klaus falls onto his bed and stares at the ceiling for a few seconds, before croaking out, “Almost a year.”

“A year,” Five repeats. Such a short time. But still so very, very long. “What happened?”

He thinks back to just a few days ago, in this very same room, when Klaus was the one asking him that question. The turnaround makes something very, very faint kindle in his chest, before flickering out too fast for him to catch what it was.

Klaus rolls his head to look at Five, and regards him silently for a moment. Then he pulls the corners of his mouth up in a horrible parody of a grin, and clutches at his dog tags even tighter.

“Nothing you’d approve of, brother *dear,*” he says, eyes flat and poison dripping off his words.

Five doesn’t know what provoked this specific response, and because it’s *Klaus* (maybe) he tries to muster up the curiosity to investigate further. But the black sinkhole where his heart should be just swallows it up. Instead, he doesn’t respond, blinking mildly at what may or may not be Klaus, and either way isn’t *his* Klaus.

Who eventually turns his face away to stare back up at the ceiling. There are tears in the corner of his eyes.

“Just get the fuck out,” he mutters.

Five stands still for a moment. He tries to memorize Klaus. The curls of his hair, the green of his eyes, the shape of his face and the length of his limbs and the shade of his skin. How he moves his legs and positions his arms and holds his head. The way he pitches his voice, high

to low to high again. The way his eyes look in the light, like they're not here but a thousand miles away. The way he breathes, in and out, like it's the easiest thing in the world.

Five tries to memorize Klaus, because the last three times he lost him he didn't have the chance *(how very careless of him)* and this might be real and it might not be but Five isn't making that mistake again. He can't.

Klaus jerks his head a bit and glares at Five. "I said *get the fuck out!*" he snaps, and his eyes are bright with tears.

Five stares at him for one more second. One impossibly, infinitely long second. He etches the look on Klaus' face into his mind, just to make sure, but he knows that he won't ever forget it as long as he lives (which won't be much longer).

Then he leaves.

He wanders, almost aimlessly, through the hallways. He doesn't encounter anyone else, unless he does and forgets them afterwards, which is always a possibility. The Academy is silent, the destruction from the attack still strewn about. Grace's corpse is still sitting in the chair they found her in.

Eventually, he ends up back in front of his own door. He blinks at it, before pushing it open.

Delores sits on the bed. She doesn't say anything, just looks at him.

Five traces his fingers along the grain of his door. Left, right. Left, right. His wrist is throbbing, now. He should set it, but he can't summon the intent.

'Five,' Delores says, quietly.

"You were wrong," Five says. His voice is impressively even. He doesn't look at her. He runs a finger over his doorknob.

'I'm sorry?' Delores says, after a pause.

"You were wrong," Five repeats. He looks at her. She's wearing the same thing she was when he met her, that polka-dotted blouse with the lace cuffs. It doesn't really suit her. He blinks, and stills his fingers on the door. "I succeeded."

'At what?' Delores says.

"I made him stop," Five says, and blinks again. He feels strangely clear-headed. "He doesn't love me anymore. You were wrong."

'Five -'

But Five pulls the door shut, and continues walking down the hall.

Some time later (he doesn't know how much, and it doesn't matter), he finds himself in the parlor.

There's broken bits of furniture lying around, crunching underfoot. The light filters in through the windows. The portrait of himself hangs over the fireplace, sneering down at him.

He slowly turns, taking in the extent of the damage. He walks over to the bar, which is untouched. As he does so, his side twinges again, and there's a faint crinkle from his pocket.

Reaching into it, he pulls out the pouch he's carried for twenty-two years. He can feel the sphere of plastic inside, hard and smooth and useless.

Laying down the pouch on the bar, he flicks open the top.

Five slowly, cautiously, nudges his fingers inside.

The eye isn't the first thing he encounters. Instead, it's the feeling of soft, bunched fabric. The ruffled edge is cool to the touch. The fabric curves around in a circle, and his thumb brushes against the center, soaking up the feeling of rough construction paper.

He pulls it out.

The ribbon is slightly worse for wear, thanks to four years of high-profile missions and not being very well-constructed in the first place. The safety pin on the back is gone, just a blob of dried glue left to mark where it once was. The right tassel is half burned away, and the other is slightly singed. The letters are smudged on the left side, thanks to a deeply inconvenient rainstorm two years ago.

It's still readable, though, and Five brushes his thumb over them.

WINNER AT: BEING AN ACTUAL PERSON.

Five almost summons enough feeling to laugh.

He stares at the ribbon for a few seconds longer, before carefully placing it back inside the pouch next to the other items no one else in the world would see as priceless.

He picks up one of the bottles from the bar, ignoring the screech of pain from his wrist. It's square and blocky and made of glass, with a dark amber liquid inside. Whiskey, almost certainly. High-quality, of course.

Klaus' face flashes through his mind again, and he closes his eyes.

Anger, pain, *hate.* Five knows them when he sees them, and all three were there when Klaus looked at him. No softness, no happiness, no love, just a swirling storm of emotions that Five has been waiting, expecting to see for the past five days.

He thinks that probably means Klaus was real.

Five takes the stopper out of the bottle, brings it up to his lips, and drinks.

Chapter 17

Klaus is not in the mood to interact with people at the moment. Ben gets the memo after a couple minutes, and falls silent in the corner, which means that maybe five percent of the world is quiet right now.

Explosions echo in his mind, the rattling sound of gunfire providing a background soundtrack. There's still the buzz of drugs in his system, so he knows that the screams he's hearing aren't as loud as they sound, but that doesn't make them shut the fuck up. And Five's little visit dredged up some *wonderful* flashbacks to that motel room, his own hysterical laughter mixing with the flat, disinterested statement of *'you really didn't do your research, did you.'*

But even that hellish medley of noise is preferable to the sensations Klaus feels whenever he blinks, or twitches, or so much as breathes. The hot, sticky feel of blood *(Dave's blood)* on his hands, the pressure on his arms as he pushed down on the wound *(Dave's wound),* the hoarseness of his throat as he screamed for a medic *(please, save him, please, please, please)* that never came.

Klaus tightens his grip on his (Dave's) dog tags. The metal bites into his palm, and he knows it's going to leave bright red indents in his skin.

He doesn't care. He's already gutted, already bleeding out, already a dead man walking. What's a few more marks?

It hits him, all of a sudden, so fast it triggers a struggle to breathe, that he doesn't have a picture of Dave.

That's - that's -

No. No, he can't allow that. He can't believe in himself, can't entrust the most precious thing he ever had to his fucking shitty memory. Already the first thing that comes to mind when he thinks of Dave is (slack face, staring eyes, bloody chest) death. He needs to burn the *real* Dave into his mind, the way his eyes sparkled and his mouth twisted into a laugh and the exact shade of his hair.

He needs to see Dave. He *needs* to. And maybe he can, maybe he'll be able to summon him, but that will take luck and willpower and sobriety and so, so much bravery, and Klaus has never had any of that, still doesn't. He only has love, so much love it's tearing him apart from the inside out, and maybe that will be enough but Klaus has never been enough, not ever.

(Dave said he was enough. Dave told him, over and over, that he was enough. Klaus never knew how that could be true, and he's pretty sure he tricked Dave about it, somehow, but never let it be said that Klaus Hargreeves isn't selfish. He let Dave continue believing it, and sometimes thought maybe he could come to believe it himself.)

Klaus rolls out of bed. Ben perks up in the corner, coming to his feet. Klaus snags a new pair of shoes and tries to think about where he could go to find Dave.

A war office, maybe? Those are a thing that exist, right? Maybe a veteran's bar. Klaus could really, really go for a drink right now. And while he doesn't want to talk to anyone, the thought of being around other people with the same experiences he just went through, who also hear the echo of bombs whistling through the air and feel the recoil of the gun no longer in their hands, is….comforting, in a way.

Yeah. A veteran's bar. They'll probably know how to get pictures of soldiers, even if those soldiers are fifty years dead.

(It hits him, all over again, with a severity that makes him stumble in his tracks, just how - *misplaced* he is. He's caught in a war no one remembers except very old men, feeling the phantom heat of fires that guttered out half a century ago, blood under his fingernails from a man who died before he was born.)

"Klaus, where are you going?" Ben says, warily.

Ben. He missed Ben. The worst part about Vietnam, next to the abundance of ghosts, was the absence of a very specific one. Over the years, Klaus has driven Ben away a handful of times, but never for more than a day or two. He's always been *there,* looking over Klaus' shoulder and offering unwanted commentary.

Klaus isn't actually sure he *likes* Ben very much, because any kind of prolonged proximity between any two Hargreeves leads to a lot of fucked-up resentment (aside from Allison and Luther, which is fucked up in a different kind of way) simmering beneath the surface. He knows Ben probably (maybe) loves him, just like Klaus loves him back, because to be quite honest there's *no* other reason for him to stick around for so long. But it's love that's twisted up with barbed-wire memories and drug-soaked apathy, born to break apart, and Klaus knows that one day he'll look around and Ben will be gone for good.

Then it actually *happened,* and Klaus is still surprised by how much he missed his brother. He's spent the last thirteen years with Ben right next to him, always present and *there,* and then he wasn't. Klaus spent most of his time in Vietnam constantly looking over to his side to share a joke or a quip or a glance, only to come up short when there was no one there.

It was unexpectedly gaping, that absence. Klaus doesn't really know how to *begin* to approach the whole thing, but he guesses it must mean he loves Ben more than he thought.

That doesn't mean he's in the mood to talk to him now, though. Klaus ignores the question and continues walking through the Academy, hand trailing along the wall (goodbye).

He makes it to the main hall before he remembers he has no way to get to a veteran's bar, or wherever he ends up going. He can't drive, doesn't have bus fare (probably won't ever step foot on a bus again anyway), and he's not sure anyone besides Five is home.

He's not going to talk to Five again. Preferably ever, but definitely not today.

Klaus stands in the middle of the hall, blinking uncertainly at the fallen chandelier (what?). Ben sends several unsubtle glances in his direction.

He doesn't know what to do. The energy that possessed him is gone as quickly as it came.

Fortunately, he's saved from having to decide anything by the front door opening.

"- had better luck." Luther says, coming into view. He's looking behind him, with a comforting expression Klaus can only imagine him aiming at one person.

Sure enough, Allison follows him in. "I hope so," she says, looking worried. "It's been almost -"

Then she stops, eyes falling on him.

"Klaus?"

Luther's head whips around to see him, and Allison darts forward. She reaches him quickly, and before Klaus has a chance to respond, he's being wrapped up in a hug.

Klaus *freezes.*

Allison is - Allison is hugging him. What the fuck. What the *fuck.*

He vaguely remembers the hug they exchanged in Dad's office, months and months (days) ago. It was stilted and awkward on Allison's part, his glamorous sister clearly uncomfortable with touching him despite social protocol demanding she return his embrace.

This time, however, she's hugging him so tightly he'd probably be in real trouble if he hadn't had ten months of healing from Happy Fun Times With Pinky & Blue. As it is, he kind of stops breathing for a few seconds, because the last person who hugged him was (dead) Dave, and he's swamped with memories of feeling *safe.*

Allison pulls back, but her hands still grip his arms. "Klaus, are you okay? Did Five find you?"

Klaus blinks. Then once more.

"Yeah," he says, his throat slightly raspy. "Yeah, he - he killed the masked menagerie."

Both Allison and Luther relax. "That's good," Luther offers, standing awkwardly. "We were - really worried about you."

Klaus blinks again. "You noticed I was gone?" he says, before he can stop himself.

They both flinch.

He looks between them.

"Ah," he says.

Ben closes his eyes.

“Klaus,” Allison says, dropping her hands from his arms, but she fumbles with her words. Terrible trait for an actress to have, she should look into that. “I - we -”

“Are you hurt?” Luther cuts in He looks Klaus up and down, intently. “Five thought they - but you seem okay.”

Klaus lets out a bark of laughter that’s just a hair too brittle. He ignores the way this makes Allison still.

“Oh, I’m fine, don’t worry about me,” he says airily, waving a hand. He lopes toward the parlor. If he can’t go to a bar anytime soon, there’s at least a lovely stash of alcohol right here.

“Klaus, wait,” Allison tries, but he’s a man on a mission. He swings toward the bar, intent on that two-thirds full bottle of whiskey he vaguely remembers being next to the amaretto. Some vodka sounds nice, too, but he can’t remember if there’s any or if he finished it off -

And then he stops.

And can only stare.

“Five?” he hears himself saying.

“What -” Luther says, coming up behind him, only to also stop and stare. “What.”

Allison completes their little trio. “Is he….”

“Completely wasted?” Kalus says, and for the first time in the past twelve hours he feels a bubble of laughter inside his chest. “Totally.”

****

It’s less funny when they try to move Five to an actual bed and find, in the process, that Five has a truly impressive amount of dried blood on him, along with several worrying injuries. Klaus reaches back in his memories and realizes he must have gotten them while fighting Pinky and Blue. He has no idea why Five hasn’t tended to any of them yet, the moron, and there’s a mad scramble to the infirmary, Luther cradling Five like he might break apart.

Considering this is his third infirmary trip in, like, five days (is that right? he can’t remember), Klaus gives Luther a pass on that. Five probably won’t, when he wakes up, but it looks like that won’t be happening for a while. Klaus can smell the alcohol on his breath from several feet away, and he knows from experience that Five is going to be out for a few more hours yet.

It’s in the middle of Luther bandaging Five (as alarming as everything looks, the actual damage is limited to his wrist and torso, and it doesn’t look like they need Pogo) that Diego returns.

Turns out, Diego returned to the Academy, got the message that Klaus was missing, and ran out in a panic (he phrases it differently, but Klaus knows what really happened). He visited a cop friend of his, and found out about MeriTech burning down and a certain message left on a certain window. There wasn't any indication of Klaus' location, so Diego's basically been running around threatening lowlifes who look like they might know something ever since.

Klaus is *offended,* he really is. He happens to proudly count himself among the population of lowlifes, and he resents the implicit violence to his people. Not enough to, like, say anything, because Diego is very stabby and Klaus isn't *that* fond of his fellow lowlifes, but still.

Diego doesn't hug him, but it's a near thing. Even that much is enough to make Klaus question whether that briefcase actually sent him to an alternate universe instead of time-travelling. What the fuck is *going on,* seriously.

"But you're okay?" Diego says, scanning him up and down the same way Luther did. "They didn't hurt you?"

"He says they didn't," Luther says, wrapping Five's splint. He frowns at Klaus. "You told them about MeriTech, didn't you? Jesus christ, Klaus, did you even wait to tell them everything?"

Klaus stares at him for a minute.

The words bubble up in his throat - *I was fucking tortured for hours, you fucking asshole, I laughed about it but god it hurt so fucking much, I didn't break even though I was protecting someone who doesn't give a fuck about me, I only told them once my own fucking powers tortured me until I barely knew which way was up, how fucking* ***dare*** *you* -

But if he says that, then they'll want to know where his injuries are, and he'll have to tell them about the briefcase and Vietnam and the flash of bombs and the heat of the jungle and ten months gone and *Dave* -

In the end, it's easy to summon up a grin and say, "Well, you see, they were *very* charismatic."

Allison is the only one who sends him an uncertain glance. Luther snorts derisively, and even Diego gains that familiar exasperated look.

"Jesus christ, Klaus," Diego says, rubbing a hand over his face.

Ben glares at them, and then at Klaus. "Tell them," he says. "For fuck's sake, just tell them. Tell me. Tell *someone.* What the fuck *happened,* Klaus?"

As usual, Klaus ignores him. Ben looks even more frustrated.

"You know Five was upset, right?" And oh, no. No, Ben does not get to lie and say Five gave a shit about his disappearing act. "He basically acted like a zombie the entire way home. He didn't say a word until he saw you again. He just sat in his room and stared at the wall. He was *bluffing,* you idiot. He does care about you."

Klaus turns his back on Ben, sharply. The motion sends his (Dave's) dog tags clinking on his chest, and he reaches up to grab them again.

Nobody speaks, for a few minutes. Eventually, Luther stands up with a sigh.

"I still want Pogo to look him over later," he says. "But I think he just needs to rest. And I mean *rest* - we shouldn't have let him do this much already."

Diego snorts. "If you think we've been *letting* him do anything, you've been interacting with a *very* different Five than me."

Luther grimaces in agreement, but continues. "We need to keep him on bed rest as best we can. Convince him that we can handle the upcoming incident, that way he won't strain himself too much."

"How?" Allison says. "It's not like we know much, and what we do know just went up in flames."

"We'll get him to give us more information when he wakes up," Diego says. "He's been holding out on us. For one, he used to work for those Commission people."

"What?" Allison and Luther say in unison.

"Wait, you didn't tell them that?" Klaus asks Diego.

"Wait, you told *Klaus?*" Luther demands.

"He was there when I found out, trust me, I wouldn't have otherwise," Diego dismisses. Klaus points and nods in agreement. "What's important is Five knows more than he's telling, and now's the time to confront him about it."

Everyone nods in agreement, save for Klaus. All he does is lean his head back against the wall and close his eyes against the harsh light.

He's so fucking tired.

"Where's that eye of his?" Diego asks. "I want a closer look at that."

"Here's the pouch," Luther says.

There's a pause, and a slight rustling sound.

"....There's other stuff in here."

Klaus blinks his eyes open, and looks over at them. Allison and Luther crowd around Diego.

"What is it?" Luther asks, craning his head to look inside the little pouch in Diego's hand.

Diego steps over and empties the pouch onto one of the counters. Klaus debates with himself, before shoving himself off the wall and stepping over to stand next to his siblings. He always

was too curious for his own good.

The collection of items laid out next to the eyeball is….electic. There's an embroidered handkerchief, a small penknife, a half-sized deck of cards, a tiny blue stone Klaus thinks might be an actual sapphire, a cracked wooden pendant, four rubber bands, most of a blue ribbon, a piece of smooth green sea glass, and a folded postcard.

Klaus looks at it all, blankly.

"....Do any of you know what all of this means?" he checks with his siblings. "Because my imagination is failing me."

They look just as confused as him, though. Digo reaches out and picks up the ribbon.

"Winner at: Being….an Actual….Person?" Diego reads uncertainly. The letters are smudged, but that looks about right. Klaus can't imagine Five earning that ribbon honestly, so really, that practically cinches the fact that this is all clues to whatever incident is coming up.

Allison picks up the handkerchief. It's a lovely eggshell color, or it was before half of it was covered with what looks like blood. The image on it is still clear, though, depicting the top half of a bald person with kind eyes and a lovely blouse. The stitching is simple but neat, and there's a small 'K' in the corner.

"We'll….have to ask Five how all this stuff relates to the incident." Luther says, bemused.

"Yeah, no shit," Diego says, inspecting the ribbon as if he can discover it's meaning by looking at it very closely.

Klaus reaches out and swipes the postcard. He unfolds it as his siblings fall into discussion. The image on the front is black-and-white, depicting what he thinks might be the Taj Mahal. He flips it over and looks at the back.

In spiky, cramped handwriting, it says:

Hi 5! Just sending this to let u kno I'm thinking of u! Recon is ***boring,*** *ur doing it next. Hav sumthin pretty 2 look @, since I'm not there. XOXO love u! -R*

Klaus feels like he's been kicked in the chest.

"Put it back," he hears himself say.

His siblings stop whatever conversation they were having and blink at him, even Ben.

"What?" Diego says.

"Put it back," Klaus says. "All of it. It doesn't have anything to do with whatever's going to happen. Just put it all back in."

"What the fuck," Diego says.

“No, Klaus, it was all with the eye, it *means* something,” Luther says, shaking his head.

“To Five, yeah,” Klaus says. He breathes in deep, and holds out the postcard. “But not to anyone else.”

Allison takes the postcard, and holds it as they all read.

The handwriting is cramped enough that it's almost hard to read, but it actually looks a little like *his,* if he squints (maybe? When did he last write something down?). The words also sound sort of like something he'd say. Maybe that's what Five meant that they'd get along.

He watches his siblings trace their eyes over the letters. He sees them widen when they reach the end.

“Oh,” Allison says, stunned.

“Raithe,” Diego says, almost softly. He looks at the collection on the counter with new eyes.

Klaus’ hand comes up to grab his (Dave’s) *(his Dave’s)* dog tags, once again.

He doesn’t know what kind of relationship Five and Raithe had. But he can remember the tremble in Five’s voice when he spoke about him, saw Five crying in that very same infirmary chair when he realized he was dead, heard Five say, without any kind of hesitation, that he loved him.

Klaus understands a lot of things a lot better than he did ten months ago. And even if he doesn’t know exactly what Raithe was to Five, he knows what love is now, and he knows what it’s like to lose it.

“Put it back,” he repeats.

They put the items back.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

I have this chapter nicknamed as ‘Book of Revelations’ in my head, because *hoo boy.*

Five wakes up in the infirmary - again. Bandages are wrapped around his injuries - again. He can tell, even before he opens his eyes, that his siblings are here - again.

But for the first time, Five doesn’t have that split second where he doesn’t remember Klaus is gone. The knowledge doesn’t take the time to ambush him once he’s more cognizant, because it’s already there, crouching in his subconscious, claws dug in deep, an ugly seeping wound in the middle of his mind. Inescapable.

Five swallows.

The pounding in his head is intense - a hangover, the likes of which he hasn’t seen in years. Klaus was always pretty strict about cutting him off when he started drinking too much, even when the numbers weren’t adding up and all he wanted to do was *forget.* But now Klaus is gone (dead), and Five has just ingested an enormous amount of alcohol in a body with a significantly lower BMI than he’s used to. He’s mildly surprised he didn’t die of alcohol poisoning.

“Five?” Allison’s voice says.

He debates ignoring her. But it sounds like his brothers are in the room as well, and even if he can’t look at Klaus he knows Luther and Diego won’t let him rest.

(Why can’t he just fucking *rest.*)

Five opens his eyes.

Thankfully, Klaus is standing over against the wall, uncharacteristically quiet and assiduously avoiding looking anywhere in Five’s direction. If Five doesn’t turn his head too much, he can almost pretend Klaus isn’t even in the room.

It hurts, that he has to do that, but the alternative is a short trip to a(nother) mental breakdown, and Five has recovered enough faculties to vaguely, sort of make motions toward avoiding that. Klaus….Klaus would want him to take care of himself.

(It occurs to Five that Klaus spent twenty-two years doing his absolute best to make sure that Five stayed healthy and sane, and Five has thrown it all away in less than a week. Typical.)

He looks at the siblings arrayed in front of him (and wonders, for the first time, what Ben must think of him for allowing Klaus to get sucked away to who-knows-where for a year. Nothing good, surely). Luther is in the front, Diego and Allison flanking him.

Textbook Academy formation. They might not even be aware of it.

“Five,” Luther says seriously. “We need to talk.”

He almost arches an eyebrow, but can’t pull up enough feeling to put into it. “Do we,” he says instead, flatly.

Klaus flinches in the corner of his eye, and Five doesn’t even know why. He’s lost track of how he keeps hurting his brother (he is so, so very good at it). At this point, his mere existence might just be doing it.

“Yeah, we do,” Luther says, standing up straighter. “We need to know more about what’s coming.”

It actually takes Five a second to realize they’re talking about the apocalypse.

Five leans his head back and closes his eyes. “What’s the point,” he mumbles.

“The *point* is,” Diego says, “If we’re going to stop this, then we need more *information.* Now, I don’t know about you, but I don’t feel all that happy about just giving up.”

“Mm,” Five says, and lets out a bitter laugh. “Well, you might want to get used to it. MeriTech was our only lead. Even if our target still needs a prosthetic eyeball, they’re not going to get it from the place that just exploded. They just slipped our only net.”

“Come on, Five, surely you must know something,” Luther prods. There’s an expectant look in his eyes, like he really thinks Five will whip out some unmentioned lead from nowhere.

“I don’t,” Five breathes. It hurts to say, but he’s grown used to hurting by now. “I don’t know shit.”

And it’s true. The only other clue is the white light Klaus saw just before his death, and it’s not like that is very traceable. He spoke about how it was unique, terrifying, *overwhelming,* but it’s not like Five can go around the entire city asking about a bright white light that inspires fear and awe in equal measure. Honestly, in all probability, if Five manages to find the light then it’s probably already too late.

“Bullshit,” Diego snaps. Five’s eyes fly up to his face, a sudden stab of shock momentarily breaking through the fog laid over his mind.

“What?” he says.

Diego crosses his arms. “I call bullshit,” he repeats, giving Five a hard stare. “You fucking time-travelled, Five, and I don’t know how long you were with the Commission but they clearly have a lot of resources. There weren't any records of what happened? None at all?

Survivors didn't talk about it, no one studied it, there weren't books or papers or fucking dramatizations? For fucks sake, Five, you haven't even told us the death toll!"

Five can't quite breathe.

"No," he says. He's not sure what he's asking for, and shakes his head. "No -"

"Five, you need to tell us *something,*" Luther says. He's using his 'I am Number One' tone, the one that expects instant obedience but has never, according to either Five's memories or Klaus' recountings, actually elicted it. "We need to know what we're fighting against."

Five is shaking.

"Just -" Allison says, and stops uncertainly. "Five, will you please just tell us? We can fix this."

"Going to rumor me if I don't?" Five rasps, craning his neck to look up at her. His hand is bunched in the sheets, tight enough to make his knuckles go white, but it's still shaking.

Aliison's face freezes, before she closes it off. "Maybe," she says cooly, crossing her arms.

"What do you *know,* Five?" Diego says. "Start small. How many people die?"

Five laughs. It's a little hysterical.

"No," he says. "No, no, *no* -"

"Guys…." he hears Klaus say. But Klaus is dead, he's deaddeaddead, just like their siblings, just like everyone, they're all *dead* and he can't stop it, could never stop it, was an idiot to think he ever could.

He tastes ash.

There's a hand on his shoulder, but it's wrong, all wrong, too big and too rough and it's shaking him a little, something Klaus would never do.

"Will you just tell us the *truth* for once?" Luther says, and Five's mouth is too full of ash to reply with anything other than a laugh.

"Move," Allison says, and then she's in front of him with her mouth in a hard angry slash and a sliver of loathing in her eyes (at her or him or both, he can't tell), and he has just enough time to realize what's about to happen before she opens her mouth and says -

"I heard a rumor you told us everything you know about the incident we're trying to stop."

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Allison has rumored him before.

She was never one to practice restraint with her powers, not on criminals or reporters or strangers and definitely not on her siblings. Five suspects she even rumored Dad, once or twice, although he never had anything more than a gut feeling about that.

Usually it was little things - making them do her chores, having them cater to her for the afternoon, forcing them to say something embarrassing. She sometimes did bigger things, but since she wasn't an actual sociopath she took them off fairly soon afterwards.

Five usually jumped away as soon as he realized she was starting her trademark phrase, but sometimes he wasn't fast enough, and she caught him. If it wasn't so infuriating, it might have been a pretty good training exercise.

The feeling is just like he remembers. All of a sudden, all that matters is following her instructions. All his worries fall away, and he feels lighter than he has in - so long. So very long.

He feels his shoulders relax, and he looks at his siblings standing in front of him. They look expectant, and he doesn't want to keep them waiting.

"The apocalypse happens in four days," he tells them. "Everyone on Earth dies. The owner of the eye causes it, somehow. I think you fought them, Luther was holding it when I found your bodies."

There

is

absolute

silence.

And Five blinks as the rumor loosens its hold on him and dissipates like a summer fog.

He looks at his siblings, standing frozen in front of him, staring with chalk-white faces.

He leans back in the infirmary bed and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Shit," he mutters.

"....The *apocalypse?*" Klaus says. "Like, the actual fucking apocalypse. *That's* what you're trying to stop."

"Hold on," Diego says, stepping forward and blinking rapidly. "We *die?*"

"Oh my god," Allison whispers, bringing her hands up to her mouth.

"What the fuck," Luther says blankly.

Five sighs, and closes his eyes. He doesn't want to look at their faces, pale and staring and (dead) frozen in shock.

“Yes,” he says to the room at large. “The apocalypse. Everyone dies, including you. And I have no more leads, no clues, no idea of what happened. Nothing. Happy now?”

The silence that follows indicates that they probably aren’t happy now. Five doesn’t give a fuck. Be careful what you wish for, and all. They’re following his example in learning that the hard way.

“Wait, so you….found us?” Klaus says, and Five can almost picture him leaning in closer. “Our bodies? After you got there?”

Five nods, slowly.

“I buried you,” he says, the words heavy on his tongue, but Klaus was always insistent that they tell everyone Five gave them a burial. He teased Five with it, saying he’d expose ‘that gooey soft center of yours’, and Five could easily not tell them now but it feels - wrong. Klaus was so eager to share it. “I dug graves for you - they weren’t deep, I wasn’t very strong, but. I buried you.”

He ghosts his fingers along the sheets he’s under. Their texture isn’t unpleasant, but it’s rougher than he’s used to. It - helps, he thinks. In reminding himself of where he is in the present moment. He keeps his eyes closed.

“Five,” Diego say slowly. “How l-long were y-y-”

“It doesn’t matter,” Five interrupts, firmly. He opens his eyes, finally. “That doesn’t matter.”

“Five -” Luther says.

“It *doesn’t,*" Five says, staring them down, daring them to contradict him.

Because they’re imagining that he was alone. That for eighteen years, there was no one there for him but the sound of his own voice, that he could only rely on his own two (then one) hands, that if he died there would be no one left to mourn him.

And they’re *wrong.*

It was bad, certainly. It was something he never wants to go through again, something he’d die to try and stop, something that will never stop decorating his nightmares as long as he lives. But he *wasn’t* alone. Those first few months - yes, that was hell. Pure, unremitting hell. But *it didn’t last.* He had Klaus, and he had Delores, and it was the three of them in the middle of the apocalypse. They were together, they loved each other, they were a *family.*

Compared to that, the apocalypse could never loom quite as tall as it wanted.

He stares down his siblings until they look away. All except Klaus, who is unnervingly blank-faced, running a thumb over his dog tags in a rhythmic motion.

Luther clears his throat. “So - so how does the Commission figure into all this? Weren’t they wiped out too?”

Five blinks at him, before he remembers that no one besides Klaus knows the Commission has access to time travel. Though that really should have been obvious, considering they followed him after his jump.

“They have time travel as well,” Five says, not quite managing to keep the dryness from his tone. “In fact, that’s their whole purpose. They maintain the timeline, ensure certain events come to pass. They approached” us “me and offered a way out of the apocalypse in return for becoming an agent, and” we “I accepted. I worked for them for a few years, before they decided” we “I was getting too close to figuring out how to jump back on my own to try and avert the apocalypse, and, well. You know the rest.”

They don’t, actually, but they know enough.

His siblings take this in with varying amounts of mental adjustments. Allison appears to just be coming out of processing the fact that the entire human race is going to be wiped out, Diego looks like quite a few things have just started making sense, and Luther has a calculating look in his eye. Klaus is still blank-faced, but then, very little of this is new to him.

“And - Raithe,” Diego says, and Five jerks despite himself, because hearing that name sends a white-hot slice of *pain* through him that he wasn’t expecting. “He wanted to stop it too?”

Five swallows. “Yes,” he says, and does his level best to make the word communicate that further discussion on the topic will not be appreciated.

Thankfully, his siblings share a glance and manage to display a miraculously coordinated hint of emotional maturity, and don’t press further. Truly, the end is nigh.

“But - you don’t know anything else?” Allison says, a hint of pleading creeping into her tone. “Nothing?”

He considers mentioning the light, but then he’d have to explain how he knew about it. And he still stands by his earlier assessment of its usefulness.

“Nothing,” he says, closing his eyes again. “Absolutely nothing.”

The silence stretches out again.

Five thinks, almost unwillingly and almost not, what silence was like in the apocalypse. It came in several flavors, but his favorite was the kind that happened when all three of them were together in the common room, reading. Klaus usually had a medical textbook of some kind, and he a quantum theory one, and Delores a history book. Sometimes, of course, Klaus declared it a ‘drool day’ and banned all nonfiction, which led to Five reading sci-fi, Delores reading spy thrillers, and Klaus reading comics. They would sit, separate but connected, and just enjoy the quiet sense of togetherness.

Something deep within Five *aches,* and for a moment he forgets how to breathe.

Taking a long, shaky breath, he says, “So. Unless any of you has a better idea, I was just thinking of spending my last days with Vanya.”

Because - he can’t stay around Klaus. He’s not even sure he can stay around Delores, with all the memories she holds, although he thinks he wants to try introducing her to Vanya and see how that goes. Because he hasn’t interacted with Vanya beyond a few sentences since he (was thirteen) came back, and despite the urgency of the apocalypse he does regret being so short with her. Because while he grew closer to Klaus than he ever thought possible, Klaus is dead now, and he can’t forget that Vanya was his first best friend.

She’s the last bridge he hasn’t burned (maybe, he hopes). And he wants to see her again. He always did love hearing her laugh.

Five takes another breath.

And then he realizes -

- it’s the only sound he can hear.

Five’s eyes snap open and he sees -

- his siblings arrayed in front of him, frozen -

- dust suspended in the air, lit by the light -

- air perfectly calm, still as death -

- and a woman in a lace veil.

The Handler.

Five cannot really describe the sound that rips its way out of his throat. It’s a feral, animalistic noise, a snarl of shock and rage and *hate,* something he didn’t know was inside of him but is entirely unsurprising once it comes out.

“You.”

And

she

fucking

smiles.

“Me.”

Five - Five wants to kill her. He wants to jump out of the infirmary bed and land next to her and *kill her.* He can do it with his bare hand if he needs to, he’ll *kill* her.

Except -

- his siblings are here.

His siblings are in the room, fuck, she'll kill them, she won't hesitate, oh god *Klaus* is in the room, not again, please, no no *no* -

Five is frozen, statue still as his family.

"Well," The Handler says, smiling like she can read his mind. "I have to admit, Number Five, you put on quite the show. Killing Hazel and Cha-Cha even with your - disadvantage?" Her eyes flicking over to Klaus makes it clear what his 'disadvantage' was. "Truly impressive. Your detective work was slightly subpar, but then reconnaissance was always your partner's area of expertise."

"Don't," Five says, rage momentarily overriding his fear. "Don't you dare fucking talk about him."

The Handler raises an elegant eyebrow. "Who, you mean Raithe? Or should I say Kl-"

"Don't."

The Handler pauses, and there's the slightest hint of - something, across her face.

Then she recovers. "Oh, but Five. That's just who I came to talk about."

Five bares his teeth. "I don't want to hear it."

There's a gleam in her eye. It puts him even more on edge, every cell in his body *screaming* at him to kill her, get his siblings away from her, get *Klaus* away from her.

She hums, and tilts her head to glance over at Klaus. Five nearly jumps over and snaps her neck on the spot, fear or no.

"It's remarkable, really," she says, almost offhandedly. "Who would have ever thought *that,*" she flicks a few fingers at Klaus, standing slumped and haggard and almost certainly high, "could turn into….well. And his powers - not the *most* powerful of you all, but certainly the most versatile, don't you think? They're fascinating."

"Stay away from him," Five *growls.*

"I'm sure you learned quite a lot about metaphysics when you were studying him," The Handler continues, as if she didn't even hear him. "But imagine what you could learn in a real lab, with actual equipment and trained scientists."

She takes a half step towards Klaus, eyes fixed on his face.

And with a *roar* of rage, Five *jumps,* crashing into her and sending them smacking against the wall. His hand finds her throat, and he pins her, legs twisted beneath her like a broken marionette. She doesn't even have time to reach her hands up. Five's wrist screams at him, but he barely registers it.

"You don't touch him," he snarls, the words barely coherent. "You don't *fucking touch him,* do you understand me? You killed him once, you're not doing it again!"

Even with his hand on her neck, she has enough strength to lean her head forward a bit. She looks him in the eye.

"Haven't you figured it out, Five?" she murmurs.

She's still not reaching up, and there's a single, bare ray of thought in his mind that realizes -

- she hasn't stopped smiling.

"We didn't kill Klaus. *We captured him.*"

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

> Well, dropping that bomb last chapter was FUN. You guys have no idea how long I've been sitting on that (months. Literal, actual MONTHS).
>
> So I know y'all wanted to know if Ben saw what just happened, and I am forced to conclude that he didn't. In canon he didn't seem to notice the timestop when The Handler showed up, because I think he would have told Klaus what the hell happened to Five. So he was frozen just like everyone else.
>
> So now we get even more confusion! Isn't this fun!

Klaus is very confused.

It's not like this is a new state of being for him. Drugs are the greatest invention of man, but side effects tend to be inevitable. He's used to feeling confused, welcomes it, even. If he's confused then no one expects him to deal with anything important.

It's not the first time he's lost a few seconds here or there. He's used to people appearing in places faster than they should, or impatiently repeating things he has no memory of them saying. It doesn't really help him with distinguishing ghosts from the living, but he deals okay.

And really, with Five being back, there's actually a chance Klaus didn't lose any time at all and the little psycho just jumped to his new location. It's weirdly reassuring to realize that teleportation is an option that can be considered when people abruptly change locations now, instead of 'more broken-egg brain, yay!'

That being said, it's a little weird to see Five abruptly standing just a few feet away from Klaus, when a split-second ago he was on the infirmary bed. Klaus jumps. He didn't even see the flash of Five's power.

"- Five!" Luther says. "You shouldn't be up, you need to rest."

Five doesn't answer, staring blankly at the wall.

And Klaus - is really terrible at comforting people, and honestly still doesn't want to talk to Five for the rest of ever, and is *way* out of his depth here, but even if he kind of hates Five right now he doesn't want to see him *hurting* like this. Klaus has had enough of people getting hurt for a lifetime.

“Hey,” he says uncertainly. Luther, Diego and Allison hover in the background, but he’s the one standing closest to Five. Which is weird, because seriously, for someone who doesn’t give a shit about him Five has been ending up near him an awful lot lately. “Um, Five?”

Five blinks slowly, and drags his head around to stare at Klaus.

Klaus immediately regrets this course of action, because Five is looking at him like - sort of like their conversation on that first day, when Five was looking at him and seeing someone else, except this time it’s *way* more obvious.

“Uh,” Klaus says. “....You in there, buddy?”

Diego apparently gets fed up with standing still, because he moves forward and stands next to Klaus, planting his feet wide and crossing his arms. “Five,” he glowers, apparently already adjusted to the news of his impending death. “You can’t go jumping around, you need to rest. Now, I get that this whole….*apocalypse* thing is upsetting, but we need to keep our heads.”

Five doesn’t respond.

For the first time, Klaus notices there’s an envelope in Five’s hand. That’s - weird. Where did that come from?

Diego rolls his eyes. “Luther, put him back on the bed.”

“He’ll stab you,” Ben mutters.

Klaus nods in agreement. But Luther ignores Ben’s very excellent advice, and moves forward to scoop Five up.

Which….provokes no reaction.

They *all* blink at that.

“Uh,” Luther says, nonplussed. He looks between them, helplessly.

“Just - put him down,” Allison says.

Luther does so. Five is….still staring at Klaus. What the fuck. Klaus moves away, and Five’s eyes at least don’t follow him, so. That’s a plus.

Allison sighs, and presses her face into her hands. “Five, if - if there’s really nothing else to go on except for the eye, then….is that it?”

Five blinks slowly, and then again. His eyes eventually focus on Allison.

“....What?” he says.

“The apocalypse,” Diego says, sounding very much like he’d like to tack on *‘dipshit’* at the end. “There’s really nothing else you can think of?”

It takes Five several seconds to answer. "...Oh," he says faintly. "That….no, nothing."

"Well, that doesn't mean there's nothing we can find out," Luther says, lighting up in that way he does when he gets an idea. "You know, I bet it has something to do with the moon, Dad told me there was a reason I went up there!"

Klaus sighs, and runs a thumb over his dog tags.

He doesn't really know how to react to the information that apparently they're all going to die in a few days. Them and the entire rest of the world. He tries to imagine it, and while he has a better grasp of death than most people it's still just a bit too large to picture.

It's not like he's upset about his own death. He's been pretty apathetic towards *that* for….a while now. Long enough that he's not going to mention just *how* long to Ben. Over the past six months or so, it's been lessening….but now it's back to that old sense of familiar indifference.

His siblings are talking now - well, arguing, but no one's drawn weapons yet and scorn is at a low simmer, so it's basically talking. Five seems to be more aware of his surroundings now, but he's declining to participate and is still staring blankly into space. Which is….concerning, but Klaus doesn't know how to approach that.

Maybe….maybe if he dies, he can see Dave?

Klaus' heart clenches at the thought. Getting sober is - it *might* work, maybe. But dying would probably work *better.* It's been fifty years, after all, and Dave is sensible enough to move on. Klaus doesn't know for *sure* that there's an afterlife, has never given it much thought before because it's not like his beliefs will influence things either way, but he knows there's *something.*

That's it, really. Just - 'something'. It's not something he can explain, couldn't find the words for if he could speak every language on Earth, but he knows it's *there.* He just doesn't know what it is.

But it's possible that whatever it is could let him see Dave again. He might - he might even get to keep him, this time, but he doesn't dare hope too hard for that one.

All he has to do is die.

It doesn't seem too bad a deal.

Except - except. There's other things to consider, and while Klaus is inherently selfish he hasn't quite passed the line where he doesn't care about what happens to his family. He doesn't like them all that much (or at all, really), but he does love them. He kind of doubts it's reciprocated, and if it is he knows it's *definitely* outweighed by how annoying and childish and needy he is, which is *fine* because sometimes he feels the same way about them, so there, but the fact remains that he still loves them. He doesn't want them to die.

So.

If Klaus was more useful, he'd say 'okay, let's go save the word, then', but despite this resolution he's still as useless as ever. So - he guesses he'll just. Not get in anybody's way.

His siblings come to some kind of agreement (or, more realistically, get fed up with each other), and exit the infirmary. Five remains on the bed, still holding that mysterious envelope. Klaus shoots him one last glance before he leaves, and even if he looks like he's experiencing some sort of crisis at least there's actual emotion on his face now. Good enough.

However, Klaus comes face-to-face with Ben as he tries to leave. Ben gives him Disappointed Look #2.

"Talk to him," Ben orders flatly.

Klaus glares at him.

"Now, Klaus."

Klaus hisses at him, and walks through his brother. He *hates* that. It feels tingly and cold and it's just plain weird, but no fucking way is he talking to Five. *No.*

But then Ben comes around to stand in front of him *again.* "I can do this all day," Ben says, which is a filthy lie because Ben hates being walked through just as much as Klaus hates walking through him, but as Klaus looks at him he realizes that Ben is actually serious this time.

Klaus stares. Ben stares back.

And then Klaus grits his teeth so hard his jaw feels like it's about to break and hisses out *'fine,'* and turns back to face Five.

Who is staring at him again. With that same *look.*

"I'll give you two some privacy," Ben says wearily, and leaves. Liar. He just doesn't want to deal with Klaus anymore, that look is pretty familiar after seeing it on a regular basis for thirteen years. The result is the same, however, and Klaus and Five are left alone in the infirmary.

Klaus folds his arms and resists the urge to run away. He almost always listens to that instinct, and it's proven very helpful over the years, but *apparently* his family won't let him follow through in this instance.

Why is he supporting the 'save them' plan again?

"Klaus," Five says, and wow, it even *sounds* like he's addressing someone else. Klaus isn't even sure how that works when Five is using his actual *name,* and yet. It's kind of creepy, which says a lot coming from *him.*

Klaus grabs at his dog tags. They're - grounding. He takes a deep breath.

Five's eyes are drawn to the tags. Fuck, no, the last thing he wants is *Five* asking about Dave, because if Klaus sees that expression of disgust again he'll - he doesn't know. Punch Five, or break something, or curl up and cry, or walk off a bridge.

But Klaus so rarely gets what he wants, and he suspects all his good fortune got used up in meeting Dave.

"Klaus, those - what are those?" Five asks.

….On the bright side, Five is now looking at him like he's actually his brother. On the other hand, Klaus has no inclination to tell Five the slightest hint of information about Dave.

"They're dog tags, *mein bruder,*" Klaus says lightly. Or as lightly as he can manage, anyways. "What, never seen such a thing?"

"Not in person," Five says, distantly. Which, right. Thirteen years in the Academy, however-long in the apocalypse, and then straight to The Commission. He really wouldn't have had the opportunity to see a *lot* of things in person. "Whose are they?"

"Why," Klaus says, "Mine, of course."

And - fuck. His voice catches on the words, and they come out stilted and awkward. It's obviously a lie.

Five looks at him.

"Oh," Five mumbles. "You loved them."

That -

Klaus feels the wall against his back. How did that get there?

"What?" he croaks out.

"I -" Five licks his lips. He glances at the tray where his little leather pouch sits. "I recognize the look. The person who owned those tags, you loved them."

Klaus swallows. Then again.

"Yeah," he says, because saying anything else would be dishonoring the best thing Klaus has ever had the good fortune to have, even if he didn't have it very long. "Yeah. They're - they're the only person I've ever loved more than myself."

Five shakes his head instantly. "You never loved yourself, Klaus."

Klaus -

- flinches.

He tries to laugh. It doesn't really work right. "What? Five, come on, we all know my opinion of myself. Perfection incarnate, that's me."

"You are to me," Dave said, and the memory knocks the breath out of him for a second.

Five shakes his head slowly. "No," he says, solid and certain. "You don't think that. You never have. You don't like yourself at all."

"Shut up," Klaus says abruptly. The room is too small all of a sudden. The air smells stale even though a window is open.

"Klaus -"

"I said *shut up!*" Klaus snaps.

Five shuts up.

Klaus takes a deep breath. Then another. He tightens his grip on (Dave) the dog tags and tries to make his head stop spinning. He hears the distant rattle of machine guns, smells the acrid smoke of napalm, feels the ground tremble under the force of the bombs.

Dave - where's *Dave* -

Klaus is crying, he knows. He's crying, and he needs to stop, because it's blurring his vision and that means he can't find Dave, he can't find a medic, he needs a *medic* -

But there's no medic to be found. Just Dave, bloody and dying beneath his hands, and Klaus, who's never been enough when he needs to be.

Eventually, Klaus hears a noise other than gunfire and bombs. He lifts his head to see.

Five is sitting on the infirmary bed, staring at the wall. He's murmuring something, and it's only when the ringing in Klaus' ears stop that he can hear -

"- okay, you're not there, you're safe here, Klaus, I promise, no one's going to hurt you, it's okay, you're okay, you're okay, you're okay -"

Five is crying.

Klaus blinks, but no, the image doesn't change. Five pays no attention to the tears rolling down his face, one after the other, dripping off his chin and falling onto his lap. His voice is perfectly level, his face utterly blank, and the only concession he makes is blinking more often than normal.

"Five?" Klaus says.

It takes a second for Five to stop talking, and he drags his head over to look at Klaus. He remains totally blank-faced.

"Oh," he says, after a moment. "Good, it worked."

“Five,” Klaus says. “Um, are you okay?” Then he berates himself, because - no. It’s pretty obvious Five is not okay.

“No,” Five says with perfect equanimity. “I’m not.” Then, before Klaus can reply, he says, “Can I ask you a question?”

“....Okay.” Klaus says helplessly. He has - *no* idea how to handle this. He can barely take care of the gaping wounds in his own heart and mind, adding someone else’s on top of that is bound to end badly.

Five regards him. He’s not crying anymore, which is probably good, but he hasn’t wiped away the tears staining his face. Doesn’t even seem to notice them, actually.

“What would you do to see them again?” Five asks, flicking his eyes at the dog tags.

Klaus feels like he’s been punched in the stomach.

“What?”

“What would you do,” Five repeats, hand tightening his grip on the envelope, “to see them again?”

There’s a look in his eye, one that stops Klaus from snapping back *‘what the fuck do you think?’* Klaus can’t help but find his eyes drawn to the pouch, the one Five seems to be preventing his fingers from reaching towards by sheer force of will.

Klaus swallows. “Anything,” he whispers. “Anything.”

Five’s eyes bore into his. “Anything?”

“Yeah,” Klaus blinks rapidly. “Yeah. I’m - I’m going to try and get sober, conjure them. Don’t know if it’ll work,” he laughs, more at the sheer absurdity of *wanting* his powers to work than anything really humorous, “but I have to try.” For Dave. Because if Klaus *doesn’t* die in four days, he wants to see Dave sooner than that.

“And -” Five pauses. “What if - if you could have them back for real?”

“....What?”

“What if -” And Klaus notices Five is shaking, his grip on the envelope crumpling it into a wad. “What if you could - get him back. Guaranteed. And all - all you’d have to do is - is -”

He’s staring at the wall, shaking like a leaf in a windstorm.

“What would you do?” Five says, barely above a whisper, but he’s - he’s not talking to Klaus any more. “Would you say yes?”

“Five….” Klaus says slowly.

Five turns to look at him. Klaus goes very, very still at the look on his face.

“Would you really do *anything?*” Five asks, very softly.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Five, Five, Five, wake up!”

Five snorts awake in an instant, and zeroes in on Klaus. “What?” he says, pushing himself up and blinking rapidly.

*Klaus bounces on his heels and gives Five the largest grin his face can physically hold. “The sunrise is **beautiful** today and we’re going out to watch it,” he announces.*

There is absolute silence for a moment.

Five groans, the weight of his suffering making Hell pale in comparison. He flops back onto bed and closes his eyes. He mumbles something into his pillow that certainly can’t be anything close to ‘go fuck yourself,’ because Klaus’ beloved little brother would never be so cruel.

*“Nope,” Klaus says cheerfully, and channels energy through him to pull on superstrength. He bodily lifts Five out of bed, and wow, he did not give Luther enough credit when they were kids, it’s easy to lift **weight** when he’s like this but it’s near-impossible to keep Five from just flopping all over the place. “We’re seeing it, end of discussion!”*

The difficulty is really not helped by Five struggling in his grip. “Let - me - down -” he grunts, reaching his arm back out towards his bed.

“Resistance is futile,” Klaus informs him, turning and walking out the door. He looks down and raises an eyebrow when Five catches the doorway and stubbornly clings on. “Really? You know, yesterday you told me you were twenty years too old to be a toddler. Might want to check that again.”

Five hisses at him. Sort of like a baby snake. He’s not above biting, at least.

*Eventually, Klaus pulls Five outside. It’s a crisp autumn day, a little nippy but nothing that requires a jacket. Small mercies, because Klaus rates his odds of wrangling Five into one **very** low at the moment. Five does, at long last, stop struggling when he sees the sunrise.*

It’s breathtaking, in Klaus’ opinion, which is really fucking impressive when he remembers that he technically doesn’t have breath to take away anymore. The sun stains the sky a million shades of gold and pink and a ton of other colors only professional artists could name. A few rays of light are visible things, filtering through some stray clouds here and there. The moon hangs aesthetically off to the side, full and heavy near the horizon.

Delores is waiting on the bench they use for specifically this purpose - mostly her and Klaus, proud members of the Sleepless Club. Five is definitely jealous of them, even if he pretends

not to be.

Klaus plops Five down on the bench next to Delores and slides onto his other side. He grins and gestures at the sky, and doesn't say a word. None are needed.

Five huffs a little, but doesn't tear his gaze away from the sunrise. He leans into Klaus' side, and Klaus puts an arm around him. Klaus isn't really all that warm, but he's probably warmer than Delores, who would basically be cold-blooded if she had something so pedestrian as blood (another exclusive club).

The sunrise is spectacular, ten out of ten, would watch again. None of them speak during it, just sitting on the bench and basking (literally) in it. Klaus swings his feet a little and luxuriates in the ***togetherness*** *of the moment.*

Once the sun has risen fully above the horizon, Klaus turns to Five and squeezes him, his brother's hair tickling his nose.

"Worth it?" he asks.

Five sighs. "Yeah, fine." He pauses. "But don't wake me this early again."

Klaus laughs. "No promises."

"Ugh."

"Love you, Five," Klaus says, just to hear the response, which is -

"Love you too, Klaus."

****

There is a room.

The room is pretty bland, all things considered. Clean and sterile, but as a consequence it has no decorative features whatsoever. Presumably, it's located in Commission Headquarters, although where and *when* that is is anyone's guess. It belongs to the Metaphysics Division, a relatively minor division of the Commission that mostly gets overlooked. The room is large enough to hold perhaps two dozen people comfortably, but rarely holds more than five or so.

This is mostly due to the containment tank. It takes up a good half of the room, and someone had the brilliant idea to place it in the exact center. It's bulky and heavy and bolted to the floor, and occasionally it sparks with a coruscating blue energy. Exactly when it's going to do this is anyone's guess, which is a bit of a problem when the energy usually kills the researchers whenever it touches them.

Still, there's no shortage of scientists willing to come into the room. Partly because they're ordered to, and the Commission is not exactly the kind of workplace where you can say no to orders from the higher-ups, but also because apparently the tank holds pretty much the secrets of the entire universe, and it's hard for anyone with a smidgeon of nerd in them to turn that sort of opportunity down.

That was a lot more entertaining when it was Five who was doing the nerding.

Klaus closes his eyes at the familiar bolt of pain that thought produces, and tries to ignore the activity surrounding him. He's less than successful.

"Look, look!" Young squeals. He's one of the newer ones, and Klaus has been plotting his death ever since his arrival simply because his voice is so fucking *grating.* "Do you see these readings?"

"Let me see that," Sedgewick says. There's a short pause. "What? No. Run them again."

"That's the third time, you can't deny it any longer -"

"I can and I will, because this makes no sense. Run them again."

"Just because this invalidates your theory on soul-matter interaction doesn't mean -"

"It's not *my* theory, it's the *standard accepted theory* -"

"And it's clearly *wrong,* just *look* -"

Klaus tunes them out, and tries, futilely, to make himself slightly more comfortable inside the tank (he refuses to admit that he's caught himself thinking of it as *his* tank, once or twice). It's a lost cause, of course, and he winces as his elbow brushes against the side.

Instantly, the point of contact *burns* into his skin. He retracts his arm, and cranes his neck to look down at it. A large part of his elbow is gone, the wound bleeding blue light. It feels like it's frozen and burning all at once, and it'll definitely take a few days to recover fully.

He barely notices it anymore.

Sedgewick is lecturing Jamison, now, about something something lab safety procedures. Sedgewick does like hearing herself talk, but she's far too wary of Klaus for him to fix that. Jamison is new, though, and seems kind of dull, so hey, maybe he'll ignore her. There's always a steep learning curve in here, and Klaus can usually kill like half the newbies who come in when they forget about the whole 'master assassin with unclear powers who hates every one of us' thing.

Klaus used to dislike killing people. That was when Five hadn't been murdered and he hadn't been stuck in a tiny torture-tank for months, though, so all things considered he thinks he's dealing pretty well.

At least, he thinks it's been months. Klaus isn't all that good at judging the passage of time anymore, because whenever he overextends himself or gets hurt too much (which is often), he loses consciousness. Sort of. He basically *is* nothing but consciousness now, if he understands science-babble right, so it might be more accurate to say he loses coherency. Not that he's entirely sure about the difference.

But *anyways,* if he had to guess he'd say he's been here for months. Maybe more than six, probably less than twelve, and he only *remembers* slightly less than two. And being in a

building full of time-travellers might complicate that estimate.

Whatever. It's not actually important.

Nothing's really important anymore.

He tries to shift again, and sighs when most of his hand gets disintegrated.

The tank is large enough to hold him, but just barely. It hasn't been opened since he woke up in it, which is a smart move on their part because they'd all be dead in seconds. Most of it is metal, with a stripe of glass at head height so he can look out (or, more realistically, so they can look in). He abso-fucking-lutely refuses to be grateful for that, because *fuck no,* but he can admit that he….probably wouldn't be able to cope with being in a tank *without* a window.

Not that this is much better, but it could be worse. In some miniscule, infinitesimally small way, it could be worse.

Klaus gives up on trying to shift around. He was never good at staying still, either alive or dead, but in the last few months he's learned. At least he can control himself to such a degree that doing so is easy. He never really used that part of his powers, but it's come in very handy lately. He expects that if he didn't have it, he wouldn't be able to spend *any* time conscious.

That might not be too bad, though.

He already knows he can't *die.*

"So we're running them again," Sedgewick's voice says, louder than before. Against his better judgement, Klaus turns his head slightly. She's standing closer now, although sadly not close enough to kill her. She's fiddling with a machine and addressing Young. Jamison stands awkwardly behind her.

"Fine," Young says, sounding frustrated. "You'll get the same results, though."

"If that happens, I'm asking for new equipment."

"*New equ-* Doctor," Young splutters. He gestures at Klaus. "All our theories have been little more than *guesswork* until now, this specimen has afforded us *unprecedented* opportunities and you're just going to *ignore* them because you don't like what they imply?"

Sedgewick glances at Klaus. There's no spark of empathy in her eyes as they meet his, and Klaus might find that disconcerting if he hadn't seen that look many, many times, even before he died. He simply stares back, unflinching.

You killed my little brother. Take two fucking steps closer, I ***fucking dare you -***

But she doesn't. "As helpful as it's been, the specimen is only one data point, Doctor. Forgive me if I'm unwilling to change my entire view of our field simply because of one irregularity," she says instead.

Young groans. “Doctor, that *irregularity* is exactly why we should be studying it more rigorously! Instead of holding back and dithering, we should be looking at it more closely, figure out the basic principles of its existence, the extent of its abilities -”

“You’re welcome to *look at it more closely,* Doctor Young,” Sedgewick says, absently. “It hasn’t killed anyone in almost two weeks, I expect it’s feeling overdue.”

“We haven’t determined it feels things analogous to emotions yet,” Jamison interjects.

“That’s true,” Young nods. “Put that on the list.”

Klaus rolls his eyes, and goes back to trying to ignore them.

He hasn’t *talked* in months, and he wonders if they’ve forgotten he can. He went mute the day he woke up, after he realized and received confirmation that -

That he failed.

(Five was exhausted, already injured, had spent the entire night jumping, and didn’t have a weapon. Klaus didn’t want to believe it, couldn’t believe it, not his little brother, please no, but - but. It wasn’t really something he could deny. And then some grunt in a suit looked down into the tank and *smiled* at him and *asked if he’d like to see the body* -

Which is how Klaus found out he could still kill people.)

Klaus’ hand and elbow feel like they’ll regenerate in a few days, which is a fucking long time to stay still. He’ll probably get bored before then and pitch a fit and dissolve himself for however-long-it-takes-to-reform. It *hurts,* more comprehensively than he ever felt when he was alive, like it’s burning his very soul from the inside-out, which is actually a fairly accurate summation, probably.

It still pales next to the knowledge that Five is dead.

Klaus closes his eyes and tries to recall that memory of the sunrise again. It’s - it’s not entirely clear, in his mind, Five’s face a little blurry and his voice is off and Klaus can’t remember if those were the exact words they said, all of it faded with time, and why wouldn’t it be when he never made any particular effort to preserve it, he thought they’d always have more sunrises.

How could he have ever thought that? How could he be so fucking *stupid?* How could he not have grabbed onto that memory with both hands, that one and all the rest, and fucking carved them into his soul so deep this goddamned fucking light couldn’t have a hope of burning them out of him?

Of course, Klaus has never been all that smart. It’s no wonder he couldn’t keep Five alive. Twenty-two years isn’t nothing, but it’s not enough. Not nearly enough.

(He should have seen this coming, really. Klaus has never been enough.)

"- just to satisfy your whims," Sedgewick says outside the tank. Her voice is louder now, but this time it's from emotion. Which is a rare enough occurrence that it catches Klaus' attention. Not that he cares about whatever they're arguing about, but after so long spent staring at the ceiling he'll take the show while he can get it.

"If that fucking fossil you call a brain is capable of *understanding basic scientific principle,*" Young snaps, "What I'm proposing is simply a *hypothesis.* If I can convince the higher-ups it's viable then we can do an *experiment,* and thank fuck it's them who approves of those things because if it were you we'd still be stuck in the Stone Age because you'd ban the invention of *fire* for going against common material laws!"

Sedgewick's eyes narrow, and oh, wow, Klaus barely knows her and cares even less about her interests but even he knows that insulting her scientific understanding is a big no-no.

"Doctor Young," she hisses, stepping closer to him. Jamison scuttles backwards nervously. "It might interest you to know that I am the longest-surviving scientist assigned to this particular specimen."

Not for lack of trying on Klaus' part, that's for sure.

"And as a result," she continues, staring down Young. "I have seen *several* scientists with your - *aspirations.* Do you know what happened to those scientists, Doctor Young?"

Young looks slightly uncertain. He takes a step back. Klaus' attention, however, is caught by Jamison, who *also* takes a step back.

Putting him closer to the tank.

Sedgewick leans closer to Young. "They are all *dead,*" she says, narrowing her eyes, still staring him straight in the eye. "Every one. Because they overreached themselves, because they got excited, because they could not grasp the most *fundamental thing* you must *never* forget working in this room, with this specimen. Do you know what that is?"

Young's mouth works for a second. "I -"

Jamison takes another step back.

One more, Klaus thinks. *Just one more.*

"Well?" Sedgewick says. "I know I told you when you began working. *What is it, Doctor?*"

Young finally breaks eye contact. He looks at the floor.

"Never, um," he mumbled, then clears his throat. "Never -"

Jamison takes another step.

And Klaus *moves.*

He surges up, slamming what's left of his arms into the top of the tank. The contact burns him, unmakes him, but there's a split second where he can *throw* every bit of his energy right into it and that makes it short and stutter and *spark* -

The tank crackles to life, blue light dancing madly across the surface, and everyone in the room *jumps* and Jamison stumbles back -

but not quite fast enough.

Klaus can hear the *thump* of the body as it hits the ground. He pulls back down so he's not touching the walls anymore, but it doesn't do much. The world is a smudge he can't quite decipher any longer, and grey is eating at the corners of his vision. Most of him is gone, he can tell.

He hears Sedgewick sigh, as if from a very long way away.

"Never," she says. "give it a chance."

Young swallows.

"Call the janitor, tell him Code Blue again," Sedgewick says. She moves, but Klaus can't make out specifics, the blurriness increasing.

He hears her sigh again.

"At least it doesn't have its partner's power."

And he can't hear Young's response, because

then

he's

gone.

****

(oh, not you again)

Klaus is in the library.

From the looks of it, he's in the children's section. The books succumbed to the weather a long, long time ago, so they're basically just piles of mush, but there are still toys and brightly colored furniture scattered around. Well, the colors are less bright, now, but it's obvious that at one point this place used to see a lot of kids.

Klaus blinks, and looks around.

"Holy shit," he says. The words hang in the air. "Holy ***shit,*** *I* ***did it.****"*

The library has no comment. That's fine, he didn't expect one. But Five - holy shit, he has to find Five, it ***worked.***

Klaus sprints back over to the testing site - it's only a block and a half away. They weren't sure if Klaus could go that far, if he could even do it at all, but it looks like he can. Klaus can't resist skipping, and he knows he has an enormous grin on his face. This will make things ***so much easier.***

When he gets to the testing site, however, Five isn't there.

"....Five?" Klaus blinks, looking around.

His brother fails to appear.

O....kay.... Maybe Five teleported somewhere? Back to the library? Was he looking for Klaus because he got impatient? That does sound like something Five would do. Klaus huffs an entirely superfluous breath to express his annoyance, and jogs back to the library.

The library is a quiet as ever, though. Klaus frowns at it.

If they're stuck in some sort of rat race where they're rushing back and forth between the two locations and keep just missing each other every time he is going to be ***so*** *annoyed. Klaus decides to sit down and wait for Five to come back around again.*

Except he doesn't. Five minutes pass, then ten, and Klaus frowns up at the cloudy sky.

And then something that's been niggling at him comes further into the forefront of his mind to demand attention, and that something is this:

Hadn't it been almost ***clear*** *when they started testing?*

Klaus stands, slowly.

It had. Klaus remembers thinking it was a good sign, because clear days are so few and far between. There's more of them than there used to be (there used to be ***none,*** *actually), and he hopes that means the atmosphere is improving. The last of the ash settled down a year or so back, and clear days make Five's face look less like he expects it to start falling again at any second.*

The sky isn't clear anymore, though.

Klaus swallows.

"Five?" he says, far less certainly than before.

No one answers.

Without consciously directing it, Klaus feet suddenly break into a run. The bunker. He needs to get to the bunker, surely Five will be there, there's nowhere else he could be, he'll know what's going on -

Klaus doesn't bother with the door as he races into the library basement. He swerves around the corners to get to the common room - or maybe Five's room would be better, but they're both close to each other so it probably doesn't matter which one he checks first, and obviously this is just a big misunderstanding and Five can explain everything, there's no reason to panic, and he runs into the common room -

and stops dead.

*The room - the room is **trashed.** The sofa is ripped open, stuffing spilling out everywhere, discarded wrappers and cans littering the floor, shards of broken glass lying among other wine bottles that are at least intact, there's a smeared chalkboard broken in two over to the left, and there are scribbles on the walls in every conceivable medium, markers and crayons and pens and **what the fuck is that blood -***

And there's Five.

He's - he's on the floor, under the afghan that used to be on the couch, looking like he hasn't slept in days despite being asleep right now, arms wound around Delores like he's drowning and she's a life preserver.

*"What the **fuck!**" Klaus shrieks.*

Fve jerks awake at the noise, and when his eyes land on Klaus he -

What the fuck.

*What the fuck, what the **fuck,** Klaus has only ever seen that look once before, ever, in his entire life **and** death, and Five was making it that time as well, but that was because he was seeing Klaus for the first time after the apocalypse and burying his body. Klaus was completely fucking certain that look was a one-time deal, because how could you fucking top that, really, but here it is **again** and what the **fuck.***

*And then Five makes a **noise** and -*

Okay, he can shove the speculation aside for now, he needs to be hugging his little brother. He scrambles over and does so.

*Five - basically breaks down. He makes another **noise** that Klaus would gladly die all over to never hear again, and then he starts fucking sobbing like Klaus has only ever seen once before. And considering that was when he discovered their siblings' bodies, Klaus is a little ways past 'alarmed' and now into 'straight-up fucking terrified' territory.*

There's not much he can do, however, besides hold his brother and make useless little soothing noises. He's not sure if Five can hear him through the sobbing, but honestly that part's more for Klaus himself right now.

It's - a while before Five can say anything coherent. Definitely more than two hours, maybe more than three. Klaus almost gets him to calm down once, but when he shifts a little to lean

back and see Five's face Five grabs ahold of him and shouts ***"No!"*** *and becomes hysterical again, so that eats up a lot of time.*

Eventually, though, there's a lull in the crying. Klaus doesn't make the mistake of pulling away again, which seems to help. Five has a stranglehold on him, anyways, to the point where he's not sure he'd be able to breathe if he needed to.

"....Five?" Klaus ventures hesitantly, when Five's breathing has stabilized. Somewhat, at least.

Five's breath hitches again, and he hugs Klaus even tighter. "Klaus," he says, voice ragged. "Where - what - what ***happened -****"*

"Uh," Klaus says. "That's what I'd like to know. We were at the testing site and I tried what you said, and then I was at the library? Except the sky was different, and you were gone when I went back, and now there's - this. What - what happened to ***you,*** *Five?"*

"....It's been a week," Five says, dully.

"....Oh," Klaus breathes. "Oh, Jesus fuck, Five. I'm so sorry."

Which prompts Five into another round of crying. Klaus continues to hold him, because that's all he can fucking do, apparently, and looks helplessly around the room.

Delores catches his eye. She's sitting next to them, lying on her side, looking up at him. She smiles sadly at him.

'I'm glad you're back, Klaus,' *she says quietly.* ***'It was - difficult, without you. It's still going to be, to get him back to normal, but you're here now, and that's what matters.'***

Klaus swallows, and hugs Five more tightly. Not as tight as he wants to, because Five still needs to breathe, but Luther himself probably couldn't separate them if he was inclined to try.

After another half-hour or so, Five winds down again. Klaus forsees this as becoming something of a pattern for a while.

"Don't -" Five says shakily, and hiccups. "Don't try to teleport again. Please."

"No, 'course not," Klaus says, squeezing him. "Never again. Promise."

"Good," Five says. "Okay."

Then he starts crying again.

Klaus holds him, and thnks to himself that yeah, there's no fucking way he's ever going to try this again. He can't even think of any way it could be useful, it's not like promising that is hard.

So he continues to hold Five, and they sit in the ruined common room, and time passes.

****

Klaus opens his eyes. The window in the tank shows the ceiling above him.

He stays very still for several minutes.

And then

for the first time in months

he *smiles.*

Chapter End Notes

> And here is where I admit that I came up with this entire scenario way back when I first introduced the Teleportation Incident. This was always going to be the plan.

Chapter 21

*"Alright," Klaus says firmly. "Never again. We are **never again** using hot air balloons as a decoy."*

"Stop being a baby," Five smirks. "It worked, didn't it?"

*Klaus twitches and glares at him. **"I don't care,"** he hisses. "Look at me! Just look!"*

Five looks. Klaus' right arm is covered in congealing tar, with more splattered over the rest of him. There are smears of it on his face and in his hair. It pairs very badly with his mascara. His entire lower half is soaked with swampwater, leaving dripping trails of algae wherever he goes.

"You look breathtaking," Five says blandly.

Klaus hisses at him again.

"Oh, come on," Five rolls his eyes. "Did you wait around like this the whole time just so you could complain to me?"

*"As a matter of fact, I did," Klaus crosses his arms and continues glaring. **"You need to see what you have done."***

"Great. I've seen it." Five says. "Now just go incorporeal already."

Klaus shoots him one last glare before disappearing.

*Abruptly, the tar falls to the ground with a thump. There's less of the swampwater, so it doesn't make much of a splash or anything. The tar on Klaus' arm is dried enough that it's at least a somewhat obvious cast. Whoever finds it all in the middle of this field is going to be **very** confused.*

Klaus reappears several feet away, looking at the pile with unmitigated hatred. He's back to his usual impeccably flawless look, but he smooths out his skirt anyways with a sniff.

*Five rolls his eyes again and sighs. "Look, I didn't **know** the weather was going to be this bad," he says.*

"I," Klaus announces to the sky, "am not talking to dumbass little brothers who make me be the decoy when I only have two hours instruction in how to steer a hot air balloon."

*"Well, I don't have **any,** so it was that or we run over our time limit!" Five runs his hand through his hair. "Look, I'm very sorry, you can pick where we spend our downtime for the next two jobs, okay?"*

"They don't have nightclubs in 1300s China, Five."

“They might, actually. We don’t know.”

Klaus pauses. “...True. Okay, you’re forgiven.”

Five shakes his head and doesn’t bother repressing his smile. Aside from the debacle with the balloon, this job was one of the better ones - their target was a ***thoroughly*** *unpleasant man whose hobby of beating up prostitutes probably wasn’t the reason they had to kill him, but sure made it easier on their consciences. And with him dead, they have most of the rest of the day free to roam about.*

Speaking of - “Is he here?” Five asks.

“Who, McDouchey?” Klaus squints off into the distance. “Uh….I dunno, can’t make them out from this far. Why?”

Five smiles again to hear that - even three years later, he still remembers when Klaus couldn’t keep the ghosts away with ***searing*** *clarity. “Just wondering,” Five says idly. “He was an asshole.”*

“Ugh, tell me about it,” Klaus says. “His type always are.”

Five - doesn’t tense, exactly, but he does throw Klaus a glance.

Klaus always talks around the edges of the things he did to get drugs when he was alive, but Five isn’t an idiot. He knows it was a variety of mostly-illegal things, and that one of the most common of those things was having sex for money, or possibly just sex for drugs. It’s an aspect of Klaus’ life that Five never wants to know about in detail, because if he did he’s not sure the city would survive his - ***displeasure.***

But that doesn’t mean he wants to know ***nothing.***

“Oh?” Five says leadingly.

Klaus makes a dismissive gesture. “Yeah, you know. All smug and annoying about being better than everyone else. Christ, and they’re ***terrible*** *tippers, too.”*

“Mm,” Five says. “Anyone in particular you’re thinking of?”

“Eh, Dustin was -” Klaus blinks, before sighing heavily and looking over at Five with his eyebrows raised. “And Dustin’s dead now, isn’t he.”

“Depends on how much of an asshole he was,” Five says mildly. “If he was worse than our target, I was thinking of something along the lines of researching the specific kind of brain damage I’d have to replicate to induce locked-in syndrome, then interfering with the MRIs so no one notices he’s conscious.”

“.....Jesus ***Christ,*** *Five,” Klaus says after a moment. “No, you - don’t do that. Bad Five. No. Disproportionate much?”*

“Doesn’t seem like it to me,” Five says. He decides not to mention his plans for Carlos.

“No, of course it doesn’t,” Klaus says into his hands. “Well, it is. Even killing him is a bit much, but I don’t think I can talk you out of that, can I?”

*“No,” Five says firmly. “He **hurt** you.”*

*And that’s really all that matters. Klaus is - in a very literal sense, Klaus has been Five’s whole world for over two decades now. He knows they’re codependent and obsessive and dysfunctional, but he doesn’t **care.** Klaus raised him and protected him and loved him when no one ever did the same for him in return, and that fact makes Five want to burn down the whole damn world sometimes.*

Klaus always puts Five first, no matter what. As far as Five can tell, he’s never even thought of doing otherwise. Five has a much less impressive history, and it took him years to even notice that Klaus never expected to be priority one for anyone, ever.

Five swore to himself years ago that Klaus comes first, he always comes first. And he’s going to live up to that if it’s the last thing he does.

****

Five stares up at the ceiling of the infirmary.

Klaus (not his Klaus, his Klaus is -) isn’t here anymore. Five is alone. He’s not sure how badly he freaked his brother out, but he suspects the answer isn’t ‘none’. Five can admit that he probably came off at least a little unhinged there.

He doesn’t care.

Because Klaus (*his* Klaus) is -

Five stares at the ceiling.

Methodically, Five looks at the papers again. They’re creased and crumpled from how tightly he held onto the envelope, but they’re still readable.

Well. They’re readable to anyone with an incredibly thorough understanding of physics, metaphysics, and quantum theory. Eight pages of dense equations on both sides does not for light reading make, but it’s clear enough to Five. A few of the notations are unfamiliar to him, and the entire thing is formatted differently than how he does it, and he never managed to get the numbers *this* precise because he didn’t have access to any complex machinery or lab instruments, but -

- but it’s *Klaus.*

Five swallows.

He studied Klaus for - years. On and off, for a little over two decades. He generated theories and scribbled out equations and roped Klaus into a truly exhaustive amount of experiments and worked and worked and *worked* to understand his brother’s powers. Five considers himself to be one of if not *the* foremost expert on metaphysics in the entire world, entirely

thanks to his observations of Klaus. Even with a good amount of his research unfinished (because as fascinating as it all was, he couldn't neglect time-travel for it), he knows more than enough about how Klaus interacts with the world to recognize the equations for it.

And these are those equations.

They aren't stolen from him, like before. Five knows *this* particular aspect of Klaus' powers relate to how he interacts with normal matter. It's an area Five never managed to investigate as closely as he wanted, because most tests would have required equipment he didn't have. So Five only ever worked out the first two pages of what he's holding right now. Just enough to follow the rest of it. Just enough to understand. Just enough to really, genuinely realize that none of this could have been worked out on it's own, or derived from first principles, or theorized correctly to produce this level of precision, *no.*

These equations were unambiguously, undeniably, *indisputably* formed through firsthand observation of the source.

Klaus.

Five scans the pages again, but they don't change. They do waver, but that's due to the tears gathering in Five's eyes rather than anything about the validity of the numbers.

Slowly, Five sets the papers down on the tray next to the bed. He tries to smooth them out, but not very hard.

Leaning back on the bed, Five tries to organize his thoughts. It's - difficult, when his entire brain is consumed with repeating *he's not gone, he's not gone, he's not gone* in an endless loop.

But *'he's not gone'* does not equate to *'he's okay',* and Five needs to focus so he can *fix that.* He makes an effort to do so.

The only problem is that he has no clue how to help his brother.

(Like always.)

Five has no idea how to get to Klaus. Zero. He has a better idea of how to prevent the apocalypse than how to get to Klaus, which is really quite an astonishing feat. He's probably being kept at Headquarters, unless he's not, and even if he were it's not like Five knows where or *when* that is. If he did Five would have no compunction about storming the place single-handedly, but however much he wants them all *deaddead**dead*** this is Klaus on the line, and he can't afford to overestimate himself with so much at stake, so he has to admit that he'd probably fail if he did that. Bringing along his siblings likely wouldn't end any better, because of course they're all fucking *useless.*

Taking deep breaths is really not very helpful. Five presses his hand to his face. More than anything, he wants wants Klaus to hug him. Hold onto him and not let go and ramble on about some random adventure he once had that holds maybe ten percent truth until Five's eyes close and he falls asleep because he feels *safe.*

But that's not possible right now, and Five packs up that feeling into a tiny box and shoves it away into the back corners of his mind where it won't come out again. He can't be that selfish, wanting to be comforted by Klaus when The Commission has been keeping him captive and doing who-knows-what to him for who-knows-how-long (Five also shoves away the rising hysteria that thought produces. It's not helpful, he can't think about it and remain functional, he needs to *pack it away*).

Five stares at the ceiling.

The most damnable part of this whole thing is that, if he'd been just a little bit smarter, *he could have figured it out.*

Five thinks back to the parking garage. It's a haze of pain and horror and light and *"Love you, Five,"* that he still flinches at, but if he forces himself to go over it again, rewatches the moment where the world was consumed in silver-blue light, it becomes obvious.

Because the soldier disappeared.

The soldier Five grabbed onto, who spoke to him to say *"Your equations were very helpful, Number Five,"* who held the glowing blue canon and pointed it at Klaus and *pulled the trigger* -

And was then completely, utterly absent when Five regained his senses. The two soldiers who came after him then - they were much too far away, and the canon was nowhere in sight, and Five never even spared the missing soldier a thought because his brain was too busy screaming at him that Klaus was dead. Too busy leaping to conclusions to realize he didn't witness a murder but a *kidnapping.*

Some fucking genius *he* is.

Five blinks away tears, and continues staring at the ceiling.

Without instruction, the Handler's offer shoves itself to the forefront of his mind again.

"You can have him back," she says, eyes glinting coldly, smile sharp and empty. "In one piece, even. The Metaphysics Division will be very upset, but they'll live. All you have to do is - ensure no one else does the same."

In other words, make sure the apocalypse happens.

And the crux of the matter is - it wouldn't even be *hard.* Five has no more information, no leads, no inkling of how the world will end. As far as he can tell, there is no course of action he can take that would make the apocalypse more or less likely to happen in four (closer to three now) days.

He's not an idiot. Five can see the writing on the wall. The Commission wouldn't bother offering him this deal if he *wasn't* capable of averting the apocalypse, or at least has a decent chance at it. He's not sure how, but there *is* a way for him to stop it, if he bends the entirety of his brainpower to the task and works without pause and gets very lucky.

But if he doesn't do anything - if he just sits in this infirmary bed and stares at the ceiling for the next three days and doesn't interact with anyone at all - then events will follow their fated course. His siblings failed the first time around, and without him they'll go through the same motions and fail all over again. The world will end, everyone will die, the continent will shake apart and the sky will be choked with ash and the air will fill with rot and -

And he'll have Klaus back.

And the rest of his family will die.

Five sucks in a shaky breath, and doesn't bother to hold back the tears.

It shouldn't even be a hard choice. It *shouldn't.* The whole world for one person? Five is not a moral person in any shape or form, but even just *considering* such a trade makes his skin crawl. He's never been one for empathy or charitable inclinations or prosocial urges, doesn't care for a single person outside of his family in any way, but this - this is a deal where anyone who would seriously think about taking it genuinely deserves to be labeled insane.

Then - then there's his family to consider. He loves them, he's always loved them, and he has the last twenty-two years to show for it. Saving the world, if he's being honest with himself, was always a side benefit. His primary goal - his only goal, sometimes - was to save *them.* It's why he figured out time-travel, it's why he joined The Commission, it's the *only* reason he managed to pick himself up and keep going after watching Klaus ~~die~~ get taken.

The mere thought of turning around and *ensuring their deaths* is so profoundly horrifying that every cell in his body shrieks out in protest. It's the one thing Klaus would never forgive him for doing, that would drive him to look at Five in horror and walk away, and he'd be right to. Five can't imagine saying yes, condemning them to die just so he can have his brother back. He can't, he can't do it, he'd never do it, ***never.***

….So *why can't he stop thinking about it?*

Five lies in the infirmary bed, tears trickling down his face, and stares at the ceiling.

Chapter 22

“No, I *mean* it, Ben, you weren’t there,” Klaus argues. “He was just - *weird.*”

Ben looks longsuffering. Klaus would be more offended about that, but he’s too busy alternating between being worried and questioning himself on why, exactly, he’s worried.

Because, okay. Five is pretty clearly Dealing With Some Shit, or it might in fact be more accurate to say he’s *Not* Dealing With It. And it’s obviously leading him down some pretty dark paths, and maybe something dangerous is going to happen because Klaus has *never* seen that expression on Five’s face but he doubts it spells out anything good. Ominously cryptic utterances are just the cherry on the sundae, really.

But *Klaus* is also dealing with a whole *jungleful* of shit, so he’s struggling to remember why he should care about whatever is going on with Five. Especially when Five is clearly not interested in returning the favor.

“It’s Five,” Ben says. “He’s always weird. And apparently he found our bodies and spent years alone in an apocalyptic wasteland before becoming a contract killer and having his partner murdered right in front of him, and now believes he’s run out of ways to avert the apocalypse that will happen in the next four days. I think I’d be more worried if he *wasn’t* falling apart, honestly.”

“Yeah, well….” Klaus trails off. “Okay, you make a good point.”

“Of course I do,” Ben says, the smug asshole.

Klaus shakes himself. “But you didn’t hear him,” he insists. “He brought up -” *Dave,* Klaus tries to say, but the name gets stuck in his throat. He reaches up to touch his dog tags. “Something really weird. I think he was talking about Raithe, at the end, and he was scarily intense about it. I don’t know, I just - something feels wrong. Apart from the whole thing where we’re going to die in four days, I mean.”

“You aren’t going to die in four days,” Ben says. “We’ll stop it.”

“And how has blind optimism worked out for us in the past, brother dear?” Klaus says, cocking an eyebrow. “Besides, I’m useless, Five is bedbound, I think Allison is going through some kind of crisis, and god *knows* Diego and Luther can’t get along if the world depends on it, and *oh wait it does.*” Klaus flaps a hand (goodbye). “Face it, we’re doomed.”

Ben grimaces, but doesn’t actually disagree. Instead, he changes the subject. “So, are you going to tell me what happened when you got zapped away?”

Klaus stiffens. He turns away from Ben and starts rifling through his closet. “No.”

“Klaus,” Ben says. “You said - you said you were gone for a *year.* And now you have a new tattoo, and dog tags, and you were wearing *military fatigues,* and - for fuck’s sake, Klaus,

where did you go?"

The fabric under Klaus' hands crumples. He has to lean his head forward for a second to get the whistle of the bombs out of his ears. "Bet you can guess," he says, aiming for light but the words coming out scraped and raw.

He can imagine Ben opening and closing his mouth, and as the silence stretches out, it becomes rather obvious that Ben *can* guess. He just doesn't want to say it out loud. That would make it far, far too real.

Too fuckin' bad. Klaus is the one who had to *live* it.

He decides that what he's wearing is okay, actually, and tramps downstairs.

That was probably a mistake, he realizes, when he runs into Diego. Who is lugging something shaped suspiciously like a body and smells even moreso. Klaus wrinkles his nose.

Diego glares at him. "Not. A. Word."

Klaus raises his hands and summons a faint smile. Diego stomps grumpily past him.

There's hushed voices from the parlor, and against his better judgement (i.e. Ben glaring disapprovingly at him), Klaus leans in to hear it.

"- like I'm falling apart," Allison says, voice soft. "I've - I've been trying, but within a few days I'm dropping rumors like I'm thirteen again. And I'm *not,* I have to be an adult now, but I just keep finding loopholes and -"

"I know," Luther says. Which is ridiculous because he *doesn't* know, out of all seven of them Luther might have grown the largest but he never really grew *up.* That's a real accomplishment, considering Ben is frozen at seventeen and Five currently looks even younger, but something about the Academy seems to hold them frozen in time, eternally children under their father's thumb, and Luther never even tried to get away from that. "Allison, I'm - I don't have any easy answers for you. I guess you just have to - keep trying."

"....Yeah," Allison sighs. "Yeah, I guess I do."

There's a short silence. Klaus considers the merits of interrupting.

Then Luther clears his throat and says, "Uh, so I think Dad would have kept my research in his office, but maybe not, there was a lot of it. We should still start there, because -" and Klaus realizes the decision is taken out of his hands when it grows louder and oh shit they're coming towards him -

He doesn't manage to scramble backwards in time, and he freezes when they come into view. He smiles nervously and waves (hello).

"Why, fancy meeting you here," Klaus says.

"Klaus," Allison says, and oh dear, she looks mad. Luther does too, but Allison is *vicious* when she's angry. "What the hell, were you spying on us?"

"Uh," Klaus raises his eyebrows. Really, if they're going to give him lines like that…. "Was there something going on that's worth spying on? Because really, this is a *public space,* think of the *children!*"

Luther blushes while looking like he'd kind of like to dismember Klaus, and Allison glares and folds her arms. It would be intimidating, but he still has the smell of napalm in his nostrils and the hot-slick feeling of blood between his fingers, so he's kind of just….bored. And at least this is a more familiar sight than Spontaneous-Hugs-Allison and Concerned-Looks-Luther.

"So," Klaus claps, and the sudden noise is enough to make them both blink. It kind of makes him blink, too, but he pushes away the exploding bomb that flickers across his vision. "I think we should have an intervention for Five."

"....What," Luther says.

"An intervention," Klaus repeats. "You know, he's probably under a lot of - stress, and stuff, considering what he's gone through. We should gather together in a family meeting and tell him we care, and all that shit. And that he should, like, sit in bed and do nothing, because I don't want Raithe haunting me if he ends up getting himself hurt *again.*"

"Klaus, we're kind of in the middle of something here," Luther says incredulously. "We can't just put *the apocalypse* on hold because you want to have a - whatever it is."

"Luther's right," Allison says.

Klaus flaps a hand at her. "Of course you think he's right, dear sister, but -"

but I'm scared and worried and traumatized and useless in all other respects and god I wish someone would tell me it's alright and they still care about me but there's no one left who does and maybe Five hates me and maybe I hate him back but I don't want him to feel like I'm feeling right now because no one deserves that, no one

"- I think this is at least a seven on the priority rating. The last time we left him to his own devices he disappeared for seventeen years, who knows what he'll get up to this time."

Luther and Allison look uncomfortable at the reminder. Ben shoots him an unreadable look.

"Klaus -" Luther tries.

But Klaus barrels over him and brushes by into the parlor, patting him on the shoulder. "Great, great, I'll set things up and get back to you on the time. You go on your moon hunt."

That's the trick of getting people to do what you want, really - cheerfully pretend you don't expect anything else, and those 'polite social norms' will do the rest. Fake it till you make it, baby.

“Why are you really doing this?” Ben asks. Klaus ignores him.

Having picked up that Klaus is playing the silent game (it happens, especially when Ben gets on his nerves with the whole ‘sobriety’ argument. Klaus isn’t even sure why he bothers, and honestly he’s pretty sure Ben doesn’t even know either), Ben rolls his eyes and shoots him an unimpressed look.

“Well, I’ll be in my room if you want to be a grownup and stop deflecting,” Ben says. He walks away.

Klaus is left alone. Well, as alone as he ever gets.

He sighs and presses his hands to his eyes.

Right. So. An intervention. He’s never had one himself, but he hears that it’s important to have close family and friends attending. He doubts he can get sober soon enough to summon Raithe, and he *really* doubts Five would even believe him if he did, so that’s out. And to be perfectly honest, the Hargreeves cannot be described as ‘close’ in any sense of the word (unless you’re talking about Allison and Luther, in which case everyone would kind of prefer them not to be).

Except….

Well, that’s not *quite* true, is it? At least, it wasn’t when they were kids. There *is,* in fact, one person who has a better chance than anyone else at getting through to Five.

To Klaus’ surprise, he actually remembers Vanya’s number. It’s been nearly a year, and *that’s* what his brain chooses to hold onto? There are worse things, of course, but really?

Well, whatever. He dials, and it isn’t long before the phone is answered.

“Hello?” Vanya says. Huh, she sounds - brighter? Less timid than he remembers from the last time he called her.

“Vanya, hey, it’s Klaus.”

“Oh,” she says, “Um, hi? Did something happen with Five?”

“Eeengh,” Klaus says, scrunching up his face. “Yes and no. The upshot is, Five is being very depressing and I’m organizing an intervention, I hear that’s the thing to do in this kind of situation. As literally the only person on the planet he kind of likes, you are cordially invited to please have a go at making him less depressing.”

“....Okay,” Vanya says. “Um, yeah, sure, if it’ll help Five. Is there something in particular that’s making him - what does that even look like, ‘being depressing’ -”

“Well,” Klaus says, and stops. How, exactly, does one tell their sister that they’re probably all going to die in the next few days? He kind of doubts it’s appropriate to do over the phone, not that there’s an official *etiquette* for delivering the news of the apocalypse. At least, nothing more formal than wearing sandwich boards on street corners.

And really, Klaus would look *terrible* in a sandwich board.

“Apparently he kind of undersold that little incident he’s trying to avert,” Klaus settles on saying. “And now he’s, uh, lost his only lead,” not mentioning how *that* happened, no siree, “So he’s basically just sitting around like a lump.”

“He’s not even trying to find another way?” she asks, sounding vaguely alarmed.

“....I don’t know,” Klaus says. He thinks back to Five’s - *utterances,* and winces. “If he is, I don’t….I don’t think it’s a very good one.”

She’s probably going to take that in a different way than he means it, but then again *he’s* not entirely sure how he means it. Whatever, just so long as she comes.

“Okay,” Vanya says, sounding firm. “I’ll come over, then. Now?”

“The sooner the better, probably,” Klaus sighs. He glances out the window. Not too long before it gets dark.

“I’ll be there soon,” Vanya says, and hangs up.

Klaus does the same, and sighs again. He rests his head against the wall for a few moments. He runs a thumb over his dog tags.

I want you here, he says silently to Dave, mouthing the words. *I want to see you, I want to hold you, I want you to hold me, I want to hear you say you love me, I want, I want, I* ***want****….*

But people so rarely get what they want in life, and Klaus least of all.

After a few minutes, he pushes himself away from the wall, and goes wandering through the halls. They’re pretty beaten up, and it’s only after a while that Klaus realizes it must have been from Pinky and Blue’s attack. Right, that was - recently. He trails a hand over the bullet holes in the walls and marvels at the fact that he didn’t get shot by stray fire. Wow, he really was oblivious, wasn’t he?

And then he sees -

“Mom?”

She’s sitting in her usual spot, but there’s something different about her posture, something odd. She’s still, of course, she’s always unnaturally still whenever she’s charging, but he can’t see the cord in her ear, and she’s staring blankly down the hall instead of at her beloved paintings, and Klaus quickens his steps and sees -

Oh.

Oh.

Klaus stops, and stares.

Then, slowly, he walks forward, and sinks down next to her.

“Mom,” he says again, except this time he knows he won’t get an answer.

****

It’s some time later when he hears the front door opening. Klaus tears his gaze away from Mom and blinks.

Right. Right. Vanya. The intervention. Five.

(Dave. Mom.)

Klaus takes a deep breath, and goes down to meet her.

Vanya looks up at him and smiles. That’s - unexpected. In fact, she looks weirdly different than normal, or at least what his brain is telling him what she normally looked like ten months ago. She seems more vibrant, less closed in on herself.

It takes Klaus a moment to realize she looks *alive.*

(Well. No wonder she looks alien.)

“Klaus,” she says. And wow, she almost seems happy to see him. What the fuck, now he’s back to the alternate universe feeling again. “I know we have to focus on Five, but - I just have to tell someone. Something *amazing* happened.”

There’s a lance of jealousy *(you’re right, something amazing did happen, but he’s gone now),* but Klaus pushes it aside. He summons a grin. “Oh? Did you finally find someone to give your heart and violin soul-o to?”

Vanya pauses, then - *blushes?* “Okay,” she amends. “*Two* amazing things happened.”

Klaus gapes at her. “What?”

“I - um,” Vanya brushes some hair from her face with a small smile. “I met someone, yeah.”

“Oh,” Klaus breathes. “Oh, that’s -”

That’s not fair, he wants to say. *It’s not fair, it’s not, I met someone too, someone kind and strong and vulnerable and beautiful,* ***god*** *he was so fucking beautiful it hurt sometimes, and he loved me, he did, he said it and I* ***believed*** *him, and then I lost him, I watched him die and felt his last breaths and had his blood on my fingers, and now you say you have someone when I don’t have anyone at all.*

“That’s great, Vanya,” Klaus says, and before she can ask him why he’s not smiling he envelops her in a hug.

She hugs him back. He can’t remember the last time he hugged her.

“That’s really great,” he says, softly.

She hums, and disentangles from him. Klaus blinks rapidly to dispel the tears gathering in his eyes. Vanya doesn’t notice, and she sends him another smile. She’s wearing a very pretty scarf. Knitted, black and cream. Nice and soft. Probably very warm.

“But that actually wasn’t what I was talking about,” she says. “I had an audition today, for my orchestra, and - I got *first chair.*”

Klaus blinks. He rummages around his brain for what ‘first chair’ might mean, and comes up blank.

“That’s - good?” he hazards.

Vanya gives a little huff of laughter. “Yeah, Klaus. It’s really good. It’s like - the quarterback of the violin section.” Her lips quirk, like she’s remembering an inside joke.

“Oh,” Klaus says. “Then yeah, that’s really good. You go, Vanya. Yay!” He makes jazz hands.

She laughs a little louder, then, and even if it’s hardly a chuckle it’s the loudest he can *ever* remember her expressing any kind of emotion. Wow. She must be really happy.

Klaus tries, and doesn’t entirely succeed, in pushing away the sudden pain in his chest.

Luckily, Vanya walks by him. “I have to use the bathroom, and then we can talk about Five, okay?”

“Sure thing,” Klaus says. He wraps his arms around himself as she ascends the staircase. He breathes in. Breathes out.

And then he hears a sharp, sudden breath from upstairs, and Vanya’s voice, suddenly shaky and small, saying *“Mom?”*

Klaus looks over at the stairs. He manages to make his feet move at last, and follows Vanya.

He finds her standing stock-still, eyes locked on Mom. She’s rigid, and barely breathing.

“Oh,” Klaus mumbles. “Yeah, sorry she's still here. I don’t - I don’t know when they’re going to move her, those psychos were very inconsiderate. Probably Luther wants to put her in a closet or something, but of course Diego wouldn’t allow *that.*”

Vanya snaps her head around, an expression of - shock? - on her face. Klaus blinks and looks closer. Yes, that’s shock, slowly being replaced by anger. Why is she *shocked?*

“You - Mom’s dead?” Vanya whispers. She’s staring at him. “Mom’s *dead,* and none of you even though to *tell me?*”

Klaus blinks. Again.

“Wait,” he says. “You -”

“She died in the attack? That was - that was *two days ago,* and none of you even thought to pick up a phone and tell me? What the *fuck!*”

“Vanya -” Klaus says, head spinning. Vanya didn’t know? But wasn’t she here for the attack? Or was that his brain playing tricks on him again? “Wait, listen -”

“No, *you* listen,” Vanya hisses, jabbing a finger into his chest. She’s glaring at him, and there’s a feeling almost like static electricity in the air. Thunder booms outside, and Klaus jerks. He didn’t know it was raining. “I have been left out of everything for as long as I can remember. I used to think it was Dad’s fault, but he’s dead. And now I’m being left out of learning *our mother* is dead, so I guess that puts to rest what you all really think of me. I can’t believe I ever fucking thought -”

Vanya cuts herself off, her breath hitching. Klaus can’t tell if it’s from rage or tears. She steps back.

“Vanya, no, wait -” Klaus says, reaching out.

She slaps him.

He stumbles back, more out of shock than pain, and stares at her. He reaches up to touch his cheek.

“Save it,” she says, and turns on her heel and vanishes down the Academy hallways.

Thunder booms outside.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Klaus is -

He doesn't know where he is.

He's in what appears to be a forest. There's no one else in sight. Klaus takes a cautious step forward, and stops dead (ha) when the movement doesn't bring any kind of pain.

It's strange.

What's even more strange, he decides, is that this is clearly not a forest. There are trees, and grass, and a beautiful open sky, the kind he hasn't seen in months. It certainly *looks* like a forest, at first glance.

But there are no animals. Not even insects. He can't hear a single sound, not even from the wind, because there's not so much as a breeze. The air is perfectly, utterly still. Not like it's holding its breath, but more like there's no breath to hold. The leaves don't rustle, the wind doesn't blow, the forest - if it is indeed a forest - looks more like a photograph than anything real.

And that's not even getting into the part where, if he looks at things from the corner of his eye, the forest becomes….*not* a forest.

He can't catch the flickers when he turns his head, everytime he looks at something it's back to that picture-perfect stillness. But it's there. The trees become shadows, the ground falls away, and the sky - the *sky* -

He should probably be scared.

Klaus feels oddly….comfortable.

He takes another step. He notices a path.

It wasn't there a moment ago.

But it's here now, and he doesn't see anywhere *else* to go. So he walks over to the path, and chooses a direction at random.

There's no sun in the sky, he notices, so he doesn't know how long he walks. He passes through more forest, and a few fields, and once over a bridge that spans an empty creekbed. None of it is actually forests or fields or a bridge, of course, but they certainly *look* nice. When he looks them straight on, that is.

Klaus is just starting to wonder if he should leave the path to go exploring or something, when he sees the girl.

She's on a bike. She comes up fairly fast, and stops in front of him. She's wearing a sundress and a hat. She has ethnically ambiguous features, but her face is perfectly symmetrical and smooth. Even looking right at her, Klaus can't say what color her eyes are.

She's a girl in the same way the forest is a forest and the sky is a sky - that is, not at all, but doing a decent enough impression.

Finally, she sighs.

(you really have to stop coming here), she says.

"And where is here, exactly?" Klaus asks.

She looks at him like he's stupid.

"Alright, fair enough," Klaus admits. He sighs, and stretches his arms above his head. He looks up at the not-sky. "You just don't expect these sorts of things, you know? I've been dead for a long time already, finding myself in the Great Beyond *now* is a bit of a shock."

(you can't *stay*), the girl says, like she can't believe he'd even consider such a thing.

Klaus looks at her. "Oh? Whyever not?"

(i *told* you), the girl says. (i don't like you)

"You never…." Klaus trails off.

(you don't remember), the girl says, wrinkling her face in annoyance. (it's annoying. couldn't you figure yourself out some other way?)

"Well," Klaus says after a moment. "You could just tell me, and then I wouldn't have to intrude any more."

(that's not how it works), the girl dismisses.

"Really," Klaus says. "Now I'm just thinking you don't know."

The girl stares him in the eyes, and he realizes - she doesn't. Not really.

(it doesn't matter), the girl says, before he can speak. (you still have to leave.)

Klaus shakes his head. "No. Nope, I'm not leaving."

(why?)

"Five is here," Klaus says. There's a pang in his chest and he tells it - *just a bit, just wait a bit.* It's been so long, but he can wait just a few minutes longer.

(no he's not), the girl says.

Shock rolls through him.

"What?" he says faintly, staring at her.

(he's not here), the girl says. (he's alive.)

Klaus takes a step back.

He wants to deny it, say she's a liar, but he knows, in the same way he knows she's not a little girl, that she can't lie to him. Maybe not to other people, either, but definitely not to him.

"He's alive," Klaus breathes.

(yes), the girl says. (now *leave.*)

"Yeah," Klaus chokes out, and the world is dissolving around him, the trees crumbling and the ground slipping away and the sky -

The sky swallows him whole.

****

Klaus is in a room.

Not the room with the tank. It's a different room, although undoubtedly still in the Commission. Bland white walls, sterile countertops, white-coated scientists going about their business. It's almost second nature to push away the ghosts that surround him, and then the room is blessedly silent save for the murmur of employees.

Klaus blinks. His breath catches.

"I did it," he whispers. It's the first time he's spoken since he arrived. If he still had a body, his voice would be scratchy from disuse, but it comes out perfectly normal. "I did it."

He wonders, briefly, how long it's been since he managed to disappear from the tank, then dismisses it. Time is all but meaningless here, anyways. What matters is that he's *free.*

What matters is -

He's alive.

Suddenly, Klaus falls to his knees. He's gasping. What - what's going on -

He's alive.

Klaus shakes his head. No, no, he can't be, he couldn't have gotten away, Five is dead, he's dead and that's why Klaus has been wishing for death for the past who-knows-how-long, he *can't* be -

He's alive.

- but -

He's alive.

The words reverberate around his head, crashing against his skull overwhelming any attempt at thought. There's no room to question, no chance for doubt.

"Oh god," Klaus says, the words distant. "Oh god, he's alive."

There's a faint after-echo in his head, something he barely catches, that almost sounds like *(you idiot.)*

Then the alarms start blaring.

They're loud enough that they manage to pull Klaus out of his - divine revelation? what the fuck, who cares, he's **alive** - and make him lift his head. The scientists are all scurrying about, and there are flashing lights along the walls.

An intercom switches on, and even after so long, Klaus recognizes the voice of the Handler as she says, "Please remain calm, everyone. There is a Class-Alpha threat loose in the building. Remain calm and follow the evacuation plan, and it will be dealt with shortly."

But her voice isn't as untroubled as usual. It's faint, but there's a thin thread of strain wound through her words. A few of the scientists hear it as well, and shoot alarmed glances at the ceiling.

Klaus blinks. Class-Alpha.

"We're designating it a Class-Alpha threat, of course," Sedgewick says, making a note on her clipboard.

"Are you sure?" Friedley says, looking at the tank. Klaus stares back. "It doesn't seem capable of basic reasoning. Just lashes out at anything nearby. And it's simple enough to contain."

"At the moment, Doctor," Sedgewick says, not looking up. "Only at the moment. We can never give it a chance, and that means Class-Alpha. Inform the higher-ups."

Oh. They know he's rematerialized.

Well. That should probably alarm him more than it is. But the only thing running through his brain is *Five isn't dead, Five isn't dead, he's alive he's alive he's* ***alive -***

Klaus has to find him.

And the fucking *Commission* isn't going to get in his way.

Almost idly, he reaches out to a scientist rushing by. It's simple as breathing to reach into the man's chest and

briefly

turn

his

hand

corporeal.

The man makes a choked, gasping noise, and blood spills from his lips. He drops to the floor. Dead.

Another scientist nearby stumbles, eyes growing wide. He opens his mouth to scream.

Klaus doesn't give him a chance.

The other scientists notice anyways. They all stumble back, faces pale, and then make a mad scramble for the door. Since there are nearly two dozen of them, they get wedged in, the ones in the back screaming and pushing the ones in front of them. Klaus can't see the ones at the very front, but he catches a flash of one woman's head hitting on the doorframe and fountaining blood.

Since they're all so courteous to gather in one place for him, Klaus ambles over. He sticks his hand in another few chests, and they drop dead. This provokes even more panic, and finally the people squeeze through the door in a hysterical mass. They all sprint down the hallway, leaving behind the trampled bodies of several people unlucky enough to not move fast enough.

The lights are still flashing, alarms still blaring. It gives the pristine walls an eerie glow. Klaus bets that under normal lighting, the architecture would be impressive, but like this it just looks *wrong,* the walls too bleached and the hallway too narrow and the ceiling too low.

Klaus leans down and finishes off the trampled scientists. He walks down the hallway.

There are a few people running down the hallway. Whenever they try to pass him he ensures they don't - sometimes it's the hand trick, sometimes popping fully into corporeality to snap their neck, sometimes it's punching them so hard their head caves in. One of them has a gun, and he uses that to shoot a few of the ones farther down the hall until the bullets run out.

Then, from around the corner, there comes a team of six heavily armored grunts. They all have goggles of a familiar make and gauntlets already sparking with a *very* familiar silver-blue energy.

They spread out, and the two on the ends rush at him.

Klaus rolls his eyes, and drops through the floor to the level below.

He lands in a room that hasn't been fully evacuated of all the people yet. Row after row of desks reach back into near infinity, each with a typewriter and piles of documents on them. The people are all professionally but not formally dressed, and they're actually following the Handler's instructions and remaining calm, filing out of the room quickly but not in a panic.

That changes, of course, once they start dropping. They end up imitating the scientists, pushing and screaming at each other to get through the door first. There are enough of them that the cork doesn't pop, this time, and once he's finished there's a pile of bodies that nearly comes up to his waist. He walks through it into the hallway.

There's even *more* people on this level, and he ends up leaving a trail of corpses as he walks. Klaus wonders who on Earth designed these evacuation procedures. They aren't working very well.

One agent is carrying a Briefcase, shooting wild looks behind her. She fiddles with it, and looks so distracted Klaus figures he doesn't even need to stay incorporeal. Her reaction time is excellent, though, and he grimaces as his fist impacts the Briefcase instead. It sparks. Sloppy. He goes incorporeal again and kills her quickly.

He comes across a room full of pneumatic tubes. Oh, this must be the delivery room. Interesting. He kills the woman scrambling to gather her things together, and glances over at the machinery. It looks complicated.

Klaus tilts his head.

Sure enough, 'complicated' turns out to be a synonym for 'fragile'. Klaus wrecks it all with a mixture of superstrength and phasing, until the bits are sparking wildly and beeping frantically, in places they aren't dead and shattered. Some of the sparks catch on the dead woman's clothes, and in a few seconds the corpse is burning.

The delay means that the team of grunts catches up to him, though. Klaus sighs and drops down to another level.

He gets chased (if it can be called chasing, and he really wouldn't) through another two levels before he finds himself in the basement. Klaus estimates it hasn't been more than seven minutes since he rematerialized, but really, there's no excuse for people to still be running around. Everyone seems to be trying to save important papers or data or equipment or something. Don't these people run drills?

Then the grunts find him *again.* It's getting annoying, and there's no more floors to drop through. Klaus frowns at them as they sprint down the hallway towards him. He tilts his head.

Then he stops keeping the ghosts away from himself, and with a *surge* of energy

he

makes

every

single

one

corporeal.

And there is *chaos.*

Ghosts *scream* at their newfound freedom, so loud it rattles the windows in their frames. Klaus can almost taste their ecstacy, the shining golden chance to finally, finally *touch* the world they've been denied for so long. The building *shakes.*

Almost instantly, the six grunts are buried under a massive pile of ghosts, and although the gauntlets burn them to a crisp there's just too many. The ghosts scream and shriek in rage as they're dissolved, and attack with more ferocity even as they're worn away. And once they are, there's another ready to take their place.

And when everyone in the hallway is dead, when there's just a large pile of meat where the soldiers once stood -

- six new ghosts form.

They groan and wail, looking down at their bodies and gasping in shock. They stumble backwards, and the other ghosts leer at them, laughing. Two of the former soldiers fall to their knees, one dissolves into mist, and the other three twist their faces into rictuses of shock and anger and start screaming back. After a moment, it becomes impossible to tell which ghosts are the new and which are the old.

They scatter, looking for new victims. There are explosions in another part of the building. Klaus can hear, faintly, more screaming that probably comes from living people. For a brief while, anyways.

He can only hold onto so many ghosts at one time, however, and after another minute he has to cut off the flow of energy. He takes a deep breath, and evaluates his levels. Acceptable, but he's not going to be doing that again for a *while.*

Klaus pushes away the ghosts again, and all of a sudden the Commission headquarters is perfectly, utterly silent.

He looks around. Even the alarms have switched off now, although the lights are still flashing. They strobe over the bodies scattered across the floor, reflecting off pools of blood.

He walks through the halls, hands in his pockets.

Where he failed to get to people because he was only one man, the mass of ghosts succeeded in killing what looks to be everyone in the building. It's easy to tell apart their kills from his, because he doesn't really go in for dismemberment or disembowelment.

The Handler is splayed out on the floor next to a half-open door one level down, face coated in blood. Her left arm is reaching for the door, while her other arm is a few feet away. There are a *lot* of bodies in this particular corridor, actually.

There's a voice from behind the door. He can't quite hear what it's saying.

Klaus peers in through the door. Inside is an absolute *massacre,* so many bodies he momentarily thinks he's failed to keep the ghosts away. But no, these people are all corpses, blood and limbs so abundant he can't actually see the floor.

The voice turns out to be coming from a machine in the corner. Which is mildly impressive, considering the amount of sparks it's giving off and the broken wires spilling out. Several of the corpses nearest to it have already caught fire.

Now he can hear the voice better. There's a quiet *ding,* and it stutters, "Telllep-ep-eportation charging c-c-c-omplete. Please p-p-pressssss yesssss to trans-transport first passengersssssss - pleasssse pressssssssss -"

The machine sparks again, and the voice lets out a garble and falls silent.

Huh. Klaus looks at the roomful of people, eyes flicking over Sedgewick's frozen face. Looks like he chose to make the ghosts corporeal at just the right time.

He keeps walking.

There's a lab where he sees the labels on a few beakers and slows down. He tilts his head, and noses around. Surprisingly, he finds everything he needs in the room. Interesting.

Several minutes later, the walls are being steadily consumed by greek fire. He knew that was going to come in handy someday. He leaves the lab and continues through the halls.

He soon comes to what is probably the main lobby. He peers out the windows. There are a few bodies on the lawn, people who tried to run in a more conventional manner. Klaus can't tell where or when he is, so he keeps searching.

Then he comes across the Briefcase Room.

It's a smoking, bombed-out hole. Fires burn in the wreckage. Scraps of Briefcases float through the air, and the entire area is charred black for twenty feet in all directions. Klaus thinks of the explosions he heard when he made the ghosts corporeal, and his breath catches in his throat.

He slides to his knees, staring. No. No, no, no, he *needs* a Briefcase. How will he get back to Five otherwise? This can't be happening.

Except -

- wait.

Klaus scrambles to his feet, and rushes back the way he came. He can't remember what level it was on, but it was in the hallway, and he ducks through floors and ceilings until -

There.

The agent is still holding onto the Briefcase, even in death. It's easy enough to pry out of her fingers. Klaus looks it over.

There's a sizeable indent from his fist, and he winces. It makes a low whirring noise, spluttering sparks, and shit, he's not sure it'll even work. It probably won't be perfect.

But it's the best he's got. The crackling of the fire is getting louder (his concoction is swallowing up all the normal fires, bathing the entire building in a sickly green light), and if he needed to breathe he'd be in trouble around now.

Klaus flicks the safety and opens it up. The circuitry lets out a thin stream of smoke. Damn, he really hit it hard. Briefcases are built to be sturdy. His hands hover over the settings.

Where is Five? No, that's a stupid question. There's really only one place he could be, only one way he could have escaped the trap they were in. The important part is - *when* is he?

Klaus bites his lip and looks at the sparking machinery. He wouldn't be surprised if he only gets one trip with this thing - hell, he'd be astonished if he actually gets *even* one.

But. Well. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, and all that.

And Five - Five is waiting for him.

Klaus takes a deep breath, and sets the dials. He closes the Briefcase and flicks the safety off.

And then

before he can think

he flips it back open

and

the

world

is

stolen

away.

Chapter End Notes

This was simultaneously very cathartic and very terrifying to write. It's a strange feeling.

Chapter 24

The sun slips over the horizon. It's nowhere near as beautiful as some of the sunsets Five saw in the apocalypse, dull and pathetic. Of course, even if it was the most dazzling sunset in history, it couldn't distract him from what it represents.

One more day gone. Three days to go.

Five winds his fingers tighter in the blanket, even though he lost feeling in them a while ago.

He needs to decide.

Slowly, carefully, he pulls himself out of bed. He shouldn't, probably, but he doesn't care. If Klaus wants to be mad at him for taking poor care of his wounds, he can fucking show up and say so himself.

Making his way to his bedroom is an arduous process. Five's entire body *hurts,* days of accumulating injuries and plowing through regardless taking its toll. He's fairly certain that if the Handler showed up again with a gun, he'd only have a fifty-fifty chance of coming out alive. It's….disquieting, being so vulnerable. Not because he's never been so before, but because Klaus isn't here to keep watch for any threats while he recovers.

It always comes back to Klaus.

Five stops in the middle of the hallways and rests his head against the wall. There's a pit inside his chest, a black hole collapsing in on itself. It steals his breath away and makes his ribs ache at the strain.

It takes him a few minutes to reteach himself how to breathe.

Then he pushes away from the wall and continues to his room.

Delores is right where he left her, waiting on his bed. She looks at him as he comes in.

'What happened?' she asks instantly. She always knows when he's upset, but Five isn't sure how she can tell the difference from when she saw him last.

"Klaus is alive," Five says.

Just like that. The words fall off his tongue with absurd ease, considering the weight they hold. *Klaus is alive.* As if it's that simple.

Delores evidently didn't expect *that,* but she rallies quickly. *'The Commission,* she deduces. *'They have him.'*

Five nods. "They want - they want me to step aside. In return for getting him back. In one piece."

'Oh,' Delores says. *'Oh, no.'*

Five leans against the wall and stares at his chalkboard-covered walls.

"I need to choose," Five whispers.

There is silence for a moment. The room swims in front of his eyes. He blinks, and then makes the mistake of looking over at Delores.

She looks back at him, steadily. She looks so, so sad.

'Five,' she says gently, *'you already know what you're going to choose. You know what he'd* ***want*** *you to choose.'*

Five jerks back so suddenly he bangs his head on the doorframe. His lungs stop processing air, an invisible band wrapped tightly around his chest.

"No," he mumbles, sliding down the wall. Why is it so hard to stand up all of a sudden? "No, no, I - *Klaus* -"

'Five -'

"No," he says - begs, really. "No, no, no." His breath catches in his throat, and refuses to move. He curls up, hand fisted in his hair. His wrist hurts, his side hurts, he can't breathe.

'Five -'

He *yanks* on his hair, and the shock jars his wrist so heavily he tilts to the side, and black spots appear in his vision. He can't speak anymore, just shakes his head *no, no, no.*

"Five?"

It takes him a second to realize Delores isn't the one speaking. It takes him another few to look up.

Vanya is looking down at him, and her expression quickly shifts to alarm. She crouches next to him, holding her hands out but not quite touching him, hovering in the air.

Klaus would have already pulled him into a hug.

"Five," Vanya says urgently, "What's wrong?"

Five actually lets out a *laugh* at that.

From the way Vanya flinches back, it probably doesn't sound very reassuring, though.

That's….bad, probably. Vanya shouldn't be sad, or scared. He likes Vanya. She's his favorite sister (he built her grave marker with special care, it was the only one that managed to withstand the ravages of time).

Five lets go of his hair, and takes a deep breath. It's remarkably easy, for something that was so difficult just a few seconds ago. He doesn't think overmuch of it, though. His thoughts are strangely distant, like he's looking through a very thick pane of glass.

"Sorry about that," he tells Vanya. "What did you want?"

She stares at him.

"....You're crying, Five," she says.

Five blinks and reaches up to touch his face. It's wet.

"Oh," he says. He scrubs his sleeve to wipe it away. "There. Now, did you want something? I can spare a few minutes, I think, but I really need to work on a few things. Lives to save, and all."

Brothers to kill, he thinks to himself, and lets out another laugh. Vanya's face loses a few more shades of color.

Then her face sets into an expression of - *resolve.* Huh. That's an unusual look on her. He wonders if she wore that look when she was writing her autobiography. He can easily picture it, now that he's seeing it.

"You need to come downstairs," she says firmly.

Five blinks at her. "Why?"

"Because," she says. "We're having a family meeting."

****

Five tucks his hand into his pocket and stares, levelly, at his family.

(Not his whole family, but he hasn't had that since he was thirteen. He wonders how he ever thought he could have it again.)

He should probably feel….something. Betrayal, perhaps? Vanya certainly looks a bit guilty, like she's committed a betrayal. Anger? They are, after all, interfering with something they have no right to pry into. Maybe exasperation - the clock is ticking down to the apocalypse, and yet they decided they were going to waste precious time on this….friviolity.

"I don't need an 'intervention'," Five says mildly. "What gave you that idea?"

The way Luther and Allison glance over at Klaus, and Diego rubs the bridge of his forehead, tells him everything he needs to know. Klaus looks shifty. Vanya is the only one who stands tall and solid in the face of his denial.

"Look, not that I want to be here, but you *have* been acting like a bag of cats since you got back," Diego says, pulling out a knife and starting to clean his fingernails.

Allison grimaces at the bluntness of his words, but nods. “He’s right. You’ve been erratic, and you haven’t been taking care of yourself, and lashing out -”

“Allison’s right, Five. And you can’t do that, it has consequences. You’ve been hurting people,” Luther says. He rubs his thumb over Allison’s knuckles. They’re holding hands. Five is mildly surprised at that. They were always careful in their attempts to hide their feelings for each other, even though it was essentially an open secret among the entire Academy.

There’s also dust smeared on their clothing, and he wonders where they went. Last he heard, they were looking for Luther’s moon research. They haven’t said anything about it, though, so either they didn’t find it or they did and it turned out to be unimportant. Honestly, Five could have told them that. It’s not like there was anything wrong with the moon in the apocalypse. He thinks he would have noticed something like *that.*

“Have I now,” Five says flatly.

Klaus curls in on himself a little. Luther straightens, eyes narrowing. “Yeah, you have,” he says, tone gaining an edge. “And maybe if you could stop thinking you’re better than us for a minute you might be able to notice.”

“Maybe this was a bad idea,” Klaus mutters, to apparently empty air.

“Yeah, no shit, stoner boy,” Diego snaps at him.

“Hey,” Vanya says, glaring at them all. Huh. He’s never seen her glare before. But now she’s staring them all down with something in her eyes that looks unsettlingly like….hate? “Obviously I’m not as *important* as you, but I think we should be focusing on Five here.”

“You said it yourself, you’re not just unimportant, you’re *not a part of this family,*” Diego mocks, jamming his knife back into his harness. He glares right back at her, and Vanya’s eyes go cold.

“I think we should all calm down,” Allison says. Her words are belied by the tight grip she has on Luther’s hand.

“Going to rumor us into it?” Five wonders lightly. He honestly doesn’t know if he’d notice the difference. He already feels like he’s floating, far above anything so petty as earthly desires. There’s just a blank static where his emotions used to go.

Allison flinches. This causes Luther to round on him.

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about, Five, you can’t just go around saying things like that!” Luther snaps.

“Oh, *please,*” Vanya says with irritation. “You’re just mad because he’s insulting *Allison.*”

“Shut up,” Allison shoots back at her.

“I’ve done *nothing but that* for the past *twenty-nine years.*” Vanya *snarls.*

“Good, so you have practice,” Diego says. “Could you put it to use?”

Vanya sucks in a sharp breath. Five could swear he feels a slight tremor under his feet. He notices it’s started raining outside. It fits the mood perfectly.

“Guys, could we just,” Klaus waves his hand aimlessly. “Get back to the point?” He doesn’t sound too hopeful about being listened to, however.

“You don’t get to weigh in on this either,” Diego tells him. “Not after you blew our only lead.”

Five frowns slightly. There’s a small - miniscule, really - flicker of emotion in his chest at Diego’s words, and the quick look of hurt that flashes across Klaus’ face. Not enough to make him protest, but enough to draw attention towards himself by saying, mildly, “As touching as this little gathering is, I do have important work to do. You can all go now.”

“Great,” Diego says, heading for the door.

“Stop,” Vanya snaps. “We’re here to help Five.”

“You can’t help me,” Five says.

“How do you know that?” Vanya steps forward, voice softer now. “We’re you’re family, and we want you to be okay, and I think we can help -”

“YOU CAN’T HELP ME!”

Five looks at his siblings. They’ve all taken a step back, and their eyes are very wide for some reason. He blinks. Strange.

Whatever. At least they’ve shut up. Finally.

“So,” Five shrugs. “I’d prefer if we just focused on what needs to be done. You can all go now.”

“Uh,” Diego says.

“Five….” Luther says.

“You *think?*” Klaus mutters to the side.

Five doesn’t have time for this. He needs to start working on (murdering Klaus) preventing the apocalypse. He turns on his heel and marches towards the door.

Vanya slides in front of him, blocking his path. Her jaw is set, hands clenched. She gives him an even look.

Five ignores it and jumps past her, landing -

and instantly collapsing on the floor. The impact jars his injuries, making him lose his breath. He wheezes heavily, triggering a series of coughs. He tastes blood.

“Shit, Five -” someone says, and then he’s being picked up, except the arms are too large to be Klaus’. He hisses and *twists,* falling out of the person’s grip and back onto the floor. It triggers another coughing fit, sending bolts of pain through his torso and radiating out of his shoulder, but it’s fucking worth it.

Probing the inside of his mouth, Five notes that the blood is coming from a cut on the inside of his cheek, rather than internal bleeding. Alright, at least there’s that. He’s not entirely sure how much longer his body can hold out, but as long as it can make it through the next four (now three) days, he doesn’t really care.

(It's a quiet, unvoiced acknowledgement that, one way or another, he isn't going to survive past that. It’s selfish, he knows, but Five has always been a selfish creature. And there is nothing he wants more, nothing he's *ever* wanted more, than for Klaus to fold him into a hug and say he did the right thing. If they ever manage to meet in whatever afterlife his brother knows of, Five is going to be able to say he did what Klaus wanted him to. There’s nothing else keeping him going.

Once that’s done, so is he.)

There’s a flurry of movement Five doesn’t bother opening his eyes for, along with a few whispered hisses, and then someone crouches down next to him.

“Five,” Vanya says, her voice soft.

He ignores her. (She hates that, he knows. Being ignored. But he just - can’t. He can’t.)

“Five, can you look at me?” Vanya asks.

He doesn’t.

Klaus sighs. “C’mon, man, please just talk to us?”

Please. The word echoes around Five’s head.

He’s never been able to say no to Klaus when he asks ‘please’.

Five opens his eyes. Lifts his head slightly.

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” he says dully.

His siblings (all of them) (not all of them) look down at him. They’re uncertain, shifting from foot to foot. Vanya bites her lip.

Klaus puts his elbow on the corner of the couch and props up his chin with his hand. He looks distant, and sad, and so, so tired. His other hand reaches up to stroke his dog tags, almost absentmindedly. “Me neither,” he says. “But how about we start with Raithe?”

“What?” Allison says, looking over at him in confusion. Everyone else frowns at him as well.

Five blinks once. Then twice. Three times.

“I don’t want to,” he says quietly.

“Yeah,” Klaus says, distantly. “I know. But I think you have to.”

Five shakes his head, and pulls himself into a sitting position. He folds his knees up to his chest and wraps his arm loosely around them. “I don’t want to,” he repeats.

Klaus just looks at him. Five can’tcan’t*can’t* look back, not at those familiar eyes, and he presses his forehead to his knees.

“I don’t *want* to,” he says, and this time his voice is pleading.

There’s an indrawn breath, but before Klaus can say anything else (Five is both grateful for that and not, because every word from him is a fucking knife to the heart, but it’s the only way he’ll ever hear that voice again), Allison speaks. “Five, I don’t know what you’re going through, but shutting us out is just making things worse.”

There’s a minute shifting off to his side, and Five can almost *hear* Vanya suppressing a comment. But she doesn’t say anything.

“Allison’s right,” Luther says. “Raithe was important to you. He was your partner, those things in the pouch are obviously important to you, you were *crying* over him - you should probably talk about -”

“The pouch?” Five says, lifting his head. He stares at Luther.

Klaus closes his eyes and says, very softly, *“Shit.”*

“You.” Five says. He blinks. “You went through the pouch?”

“We put it back,” Klaus says, sitting up straighter. “I told them to put it all back right away, Five, I swear -”

“You went through the pouch?” Five says again, except now he’s on his feet and his breaths are ragged. Vanya scrambles to her feet, looking alarmed and confused, and that sends a bolt of pain through Five, larger than expected. Surely she knew that going through the pouch would hurt him? How can she look *confused* about that?

“Five, wait -” Vanya says, reaching out, but he jerks back, stumbling.

“You -” he breathes, looking around at his siblings. “He *gave* those to me - you had *no fucking right* -”

Klaus stands up, mouth open, but Diego beats him to it and snaps, “Well, what the fuck were we supposed to do? You weren’t telling us anything - you flat-out *lied* to us - and it was right there -”

"Diego, shut the fuck up!" Klaus barks.

"Five, listen," Luther tries, but Five *snarls* at him. How dare they, *how dare they.* The most priceless things he has or ever will own, years worth of memories, the *only pieces of his brother left in the world* -

His body is lunging before his mind realizes it, adrenaline overriding consideration for his injuries. He's on Luther before anyone can process it, and it's only Luther's superstrength-fueled instinctive reaction that knocks away Five's hand before it sinks into his eyes.

I went for lethal, a small part of Five's brain realizes. *Take out the eyes, jab to the throat, grab the neck and twist. Textbook. I just tried to kill him.*

The rest of Five is only concerned with making a follow-up attack.

Allison grabs his arm as he swipes at Luther again. Five headbutts her and she reels back, and it's only Diego grabbing onto the back of his shirt and *yanking* that prevents Allison from getting her arm broken.

"Stop it!" Vanya yells. It's entangled with Klaus' loud *"Fuck!"*

Five twists in Diego's grip, and darts his hand in to slide a knife out of his brother's harness. He slashes wildly with it, and while he never was very good at knifework it accomplishes the goal of making Diego curse and let him go.

Luther barrels in, hands outstretched to grab at his arm to take the knife away, but Five dodges and stabs at Luther's side. Allison's foot comes out of nowhere, though, and jars Five's wrist so bad his fingers stop working and drop the knife.

Allison sends a punch flying at him, but Five knows how she fights, and he doesn't fall for the feint. He dodges away from where she sends the real punch, and likewise ducks under Luther's reaching arm. Diego moves in and kicks at Five's leg.

"Stop!" Vanya shouts, louder. Thunder booms outside.

Five is a second too slow, and his feet are swept from under him. He catches himself with his hand, at the cost of his wrist briefly turning into *blazing* pain and emitting a faint but audible *crunch.* He doesn't pay it any mind, however, and turns his momentum sideways, swinging his feet in an arc and sweeping *Diego* off his feet.

"What the *fuck!*" Klaus exclaims.

He rolls to the side and pops to his feet. Allison kicks at him again, but he dodges, and then barely manages to duck away from a swing from Luther. On the bright side, Luther nearly hits Allison, and overbalances when he jerks himself backwards.

*"What the **fuck!**"* Klaus shrieks.

And this time there's a note of real panic in Klaus' voice, something Five could never, ever ignore coming from his brother. Five whips his head around to locate Klaus -

and

the

world

stops.

And, in a very, very distant corner of his mind, Five realizes that the first time Klaus said it, it was coming from a different direction.

Because in front of him -

- *in front of him* -

“Klaus?” Five whispers, the parlor suddenly silent as a tomb.

“Five,” Klaus, the second Klaus, *his Klaus,* says, ignoring everyone else’s gaping mouths. “Why the fuck are you *tiny?*”

Five can’t move. Can’t speak. Can’t even breathe. If he does, Klaus will disappear, vanish like smoke, because he can’t be real, he can’t be, Five couldn’t ever be that lucky -

And then Klaus’ face crumples a little, and he says “God, Five, I *missed* you,” and he holds his arms out -

- and Five doesn’t care, he doesn’t *care,* he races towards Klaus like his life depends on it and he reaches him and -

they connect.

Klaus’ arms are solid and strong, room-temperature cool. They wrap so tightly around Five that he’d be worried about breathing if he had space in his brain for something so irrelevant. Klaus’ chest is larger than it’s ever been since the last time Five was thirteen, and he can’t put his chin on Klaus’ shoulder anymore. His new-old stature allows Klaus to completely engulf him in the hug, a feeling familiar as his own name.

Five is crying, he knows. It’s a distant thing. He can hear himself sobbing, stuttering and stumbling and hitching with every breath. He’s repeating his brother’s name into his chest, over and over, brokenly. He knows Klaus is crying too, mumbling fragments of nonsense into Five’s hair, breath catching on every word even though he doesn’t have breath.

Nothing else matters. The one thing, the *only* thing that matters is Klaus’ arms around him and Five’s arm around Klaus, in a hug he never thought he’d have again, not ever, but by some miracle got back.

It’s okay now, Five thinks, as he feels the world slide back into balance.

It’s all okay.

Chapter 25

Okay, Klaus thinks to himself. *So I was actually right about that alternate universe.*

His mouth, however, is not nearly so eloquent, and produces a sound that can best be rendered as “Glunghh?”

His identical twin (what) pays him no mind, continuing to hug Five and sob all over him *(what)* and get sobbed on by Five in turn *(WHAT)*.

Klaus looks over at his other siblings, desperately hoping they have some explanation for the world suddenly ceasing to make any sort of sense. Or at least confirmation that he somehow took LSD without noticing.

However, they look just as flabbergasted as he is, whipping their heads between Klaus and *Not*-Klaus so fast Klaus expects Pogo will have to treat them *all* for whiplash. Even the rain outside has stopped, like the weather itself is just too baffled to continue in the face of this scene.

"What the fuck," Ben says.

Klaus can't actually produce coherent words right now, but he manages a half-garbled sound that conveys the same sentiment.

“What,” Diego says, blinking rapidly, still looking between Klaus and Not-Klaus. “What the *fuck.*”

“Klaus?” Luther says, sounding so very lost, and uncertain of exactly *which* Klaus he’s addressing. “Klaus, you - uh….”

“Why are there two of you,” Vanya says blankly.

“Yaughalagh!” Klaus says, an octave higher than usual, throwing his hands in the air.

“You can’t say this isn’t your fault,” Ben says, voice distant, still trying to process what’s going on. “That’s literally you, you clearly did *something.*”

Klaus lets out an offended and indignant squawk.

“Why is Five crying on you,” Vanya says.

He’s not crying on me, he’s crying on ***other-****me,* Klaus tries to say, but it comes out as “Ghlrrrgnjh!” instead.

“What the *fuck,*” Diego repeats.

“Let’s -” Allison says, looking around helplessly, eyes inevitably drawn back to Five and Not-Klaus every second or so. “Let’s just - calm down.”

“What is going on,” Vanya says.

“I don’t know,” Luther says. “But, uh. Maybe we can ask them?”

They all stare at Five and Klaus 2: What The Fuckeroo. They haven’t stopped crying, and don’t look likely to anytime soon. They don’t seem to be aware of anyone else in existence, holding each other so tightly Luther himself would probably fail to separate them.

“What the fuck,” Diego repeats. Klaus fully agrees.

Allison takes a hesitant step towards them. They’ve crumpled to the ground by now, like their legs can’t support them any longer, and the mumbling has died down to the occasional mutter. They’re still crying freely, though, tears trickling down their faces as they shake in each others arms.

It’s - it’s a jolt to realize that he *recognizes* that kind of emotion. He’s never seen it at this level, the sheer overwhelming intensity blotting out everything else in the world, but he can remember sharing it with Dave. In those mornings they had the tent to themselves, and spent their time lying in one of their beds and just - holding each other, not in a sexual sense but simply basking in the feeling of being together. Those moments when Dave would touch him on the shoulder or on his wrist or arm just to say *I’m here,* when Klaus would instantly calm down from his futile attempts at trying to ignore the horrors of warghostsdeath that surrounded them, and become perfectly balanced again, for the first time in his life. If Dave appeared in front of Klaus right now, he would do the same thing his twin is doing right now with Five.

Love. It’s love.

Seeing *Five,* of all people, expressing that kind of emotion is - is - Klaus can’t think of a suitable metaphor right now, but it is a *damn fucking shock.* He scrambles to remember a single time Five has *ever* expressed so much as mild affection for him, and comes up completely blank, so seeing Five crying over his identical twin *still* makes no fucking sense. Five doesn’t even like anyone, he certainly doesn’t *love* anyone -

except -

wait.

“Five?” Allison says uncertainly.

Five doesn’t answer, still shuddering and shaking. It really doesn’t look like he’s going to be able to contribute to conversation anytime this….week, honestly. But after a moment, instead of Five -

- not-him looks up.

He looks *exactly* like Klaus. His hair might be a little longer, maybe, but the shape of his face and eyes and just - *everything* is an exact match. Aside from the clothes, Klaus could be looking into a mirror.

Not-Klaus stares at Allison for a moment, before putting on a shaky smile. “Hey, Allison,” he says softly. His eyes flicker over the rest of them, including Klaus himself and -

- and Ben.

“Hey, everyone,” he says, looking *straight at Ben,* right in the eyes, smile a little firmer now. “Nice to see you again.”

“What,” Ben breathes, staring back at Not-Kl - *Klaus,* it’s Klaus, somehow it’s *him,* because he’s the only one who sees Ben, the only one who *can.*

“Who are you,” Diego demands, stepping forward, hands twitching to his harness. “Who the *fuck* are you?”

“Really, Diego,” Other-him says, huffing a ghost of a laugh. “You don’t recognize your own brother? You have a reference point *right there,*” and he nods at Klaus.

Diego growls, and suddenly he’s standing in front of Klaus, hands on his knives, looking almost - protective? Klaus blinks.

“Don’t bullshit,” Diego says. “Why the fuck do you look like Klaus?”

Other-him gives Diego a sardonic look, slightly shifting to reach up and card his fingers through Five’s hair. “Why do you think?”

Diego growls again, and his stance shifts. He’s this close to taking out a knife, Klaus knows.

“Because,” Klaus hears, and it isn’t until everyone’s heads turn to him that he realizes he was the one who spoke. He clears his throat and looks at his double. “Because,” he says again. “You’re *me.* From - the future?”

“Got it in one,” other-him says, flashing him a grin.

“What?” Luther says. Everyone else looks like they’d very much like to say the same.

“The future?” Allison says. She blinks.

“Oh,” Vanya says. “Oh. That - okay. But why are you….”

She gestures, a little confusedly, at how Five is still wrapped around other-Klaus like a barnacle. He’s mostly limp by now, breathing still stuttering and gasping but miles steadier than it was previously. Other-Klaus hasn’t loosened his grip, either, hoarding Five in his lap like he has no plans of letting go anytime this century.

“Yeah,” Luther says, blinking again, like the scene will resolve itself into something less nonsensical if he does it enough. “....That.”

“Well,” other-him says, then stops. He grimaces. “You see. Um.”

Klaus takes a step around Diego. The question bubbles up in his throat before he can stop it.

“Are -” Klaus says, stumbling over the words. It’s ridiculous, stupid, insane, but - *but* - “Are you - Raithe?”

Every single one of his siblings bar Five blinks at him. Their mouths open.

But other-him -

- brightens.

“Oh, yeah,” he says. “I go by that sometimes. He mentioned me?”

There

is

absolute

silence.

“Oh,” Klaus says faintly. Then, “Yeah. A few times.”

“Aww,” other him says, expression soft. He ducks his head and murmurs something in Five’s ear. Five lets out a choked sound that might be a laugh, and redoubles his efforts to fuse himself to other-Klaus’ chest.

“Oh my god,” Ben says faintly.

“Wait,” Diego says. “You’re - *Raithe.*”

“Five’s Raithe?” Vanya says. “That - *what?*”

“Yeah, that’s what I’d like to know,” Allison says dazedly. She blinks a few times, and shakes her head. “But - wait, you said you’re from the future? I thought we all died in a few days?”

“What?” Vanya says.

“Oh, yeah, you weren’t here for that,” Klaus recalls. “Apparently we die in Five’s little incident, which apparently isn’t so little. So how are *you* still up and kicking?” he asks his other-self.

Who raises an eyebrow. “Who says I am?”

And before Klaus can ask him what *that* means, his other-self (reluctantly) pulls his hand away from Five and

sticks

it

through

the

floor.

He tilts his head, and glances at them. He gives a slight smile.

“Took *forever* to learn how to stay solid all the time,” he says absently, drawing his hand out of the floor and returning it to Five’s back. He hums. “Being invisible is pretty cool, though.”

“Oh,” Klaus says, blinking and re-evaluating his worldview for the third time in as many minutes. “Oh, that makes sense, I guess….wait. Raithe. *Wraith.* Oh my *god,* that’s hilarious.”

Other-him - *ghost*-him - grins delightedly. “Isn’t it?”

“Wait,” Luther says, stepping forward, eyes wide. “Klaus, that - you’re a *ghost?*”

Diego seems frozen, staring at other-him, along with Allison. Vanya looks paper-white.

Other-him nods. “Yep,” he says, popping the ‘p’.

“Oh,” Ben says, very quietly, staring.

Klaus shoves his hands in his pockets, looking other-him up and down. Being perfectly identical makes a lot more sense, if this him died a few days from now. In fact, Klaus realizes with a start, thanks to Vietnam, of the two of them he’s actually the physically older one.

“Huh,” Klaus says. He holds up his hands. “Okay, let me get this straight. Little Number Five jumps into the apocalypse at thirteen, a few days from now. We’re all dead, but *I,*” he gestures to other-him, “Being awesome, am a ghost that can let other people notice I’m there, and you two putter along until the Commission comes and offers you - both? - a job, which you accept, and then things are all fine and dandy until the Commission pulls a preemptive strike and tries to kill both of you. Five escapes by time-travelling to us, and you - wait, what happened to you, why did Five think you were dead, you’re *already* dead.”

“Apocalypse?” Vanya says.

“Yes to all of that,” other-him says, as Allison gives Vanya the condensed CliffNotes on the apocalypse. “And - I guess it would have looked like I was dead-dead. They had this stuff that could hurt me, and it’s fuzzy but I think I vanished - shit, Five, I’m sorry.” He buries his head in Five’s hair. It’s ambiguous how aware Five is of anything being said at the moment, but he makes a small whining sound and hugs other-Klaus even tighter. Klaus didn’t know that was possible.

“Huh,” Klaus says again, rolling everything around in his mind. He worries at his lip. “So you’re….”

“An assassin,” other-him nods. Not lightly, but not with any particular emotion, either. Matter-of-fact. “Yeah.”

“What the *fuck,*” Diego says blankly.

“An *assassin?*” Luther says, alarmed. “You killed people?”

“*You* killed people?” Allison says, looking between Klaus and other-Klaus.

“Seriously?” Vanya says. “And - Five, too?”

Klaus sticks his hands in his pockets as other-him nods. He wants to ask the obvious - *the ghosts, what about the ghosts, how aren’t you insane by now* - but can’t find the words. And he’s not sure he wants to ask in front of his siblings, who don’t even understand how the ghosts could bother him in the first place.

“It’s kind of a long story,” other-him says softly, rubbing his thumb against Five’s back. His eyes are far away. “You got the highlights right,” he nods at Klaus, “but there’s a more. A lot more.”

“I’ll bet,” Klaus says, nodding slowly. He blinks. “For one, how long did it take you to get Five okay with *hugging?*”

Other-him huffs a small laugh. “Six fucking *years,*” he says fondly.

“Wow,” Klaus says. He tries imagining having the patience to devote six years to a single project, and fails. How the fuck did he do that? And, for that matter, how the fuck did Five not re-kill him in all that time?

As if reading his mind, other-him grins. “It’s easier when you can go incorporeal to avoid getting stabbed,” he stage-whispers.

“Ah,” Klaus nods. That would help, yes.

“No,” Luther butts in, stepping forward. “No, hold on, wait. You killed people, Klaus.”

Other-him blinks and looks over at Luther. “...Yeah? So have you, big guy.”

“Right, but you - you had a code, right? We only killed bad guys -”

Other-him shakes his head. “We killed who Dad told us to, Luther,” he says, almost gently. “Five and I just got new superiors.”

Luther jerks back like he’s been slapped, face going white. He takes a step back, and Allison grabs his hand again. She’s looking a little pale herself.

Well, Klaus thinks to himself, *he’s not wrong.*

Vanya swallows and takes a step towards other-Klaus. She looks uncertain, hunched over and trying to make herself smaller. It’s a familiar sight. “Klaus,” she says, the name coming out clunky, glancing between him and other-him, and oh, wow, those times when Five looked at him like he was seeing someone else make *so much more sense now.* “You really took care of him? All this time?”

Other-him gives a minute shrug. For the first time, he looks uncertain. “I mean,” he says. “I did my best. It wasn’t so smooth in a few places, and I could have done better -”

“You raised me.”

Everyone in the room snaps their eyes to Five. Who lifts his head from other-Klaus’ chest (though he doesn’t loosen his grip one iota) and looks upwards. His face is an absolute *mess* of snot and tears and a bit of blood, but his eyes are utterly resolute as he stares up at other-Klaus.

“You raised me,” he repeats firmly. “You found me food and kept me safe and learned medicine for me and calmed me down and scouted half the world for me and always supported me and told me when I was being an idiot and listened to me and *you fucking raised me,* Klaus, and you couldn’t have done *any* better because you were fucking *perfect,* don’t you *dare* say different, I love you so much.”

Klaus is pretty sure all his siblings are going to lose their lower jaws pretty soon, with how often they keep dropping them. He barely manages to keep his own closed.

Other-him just smiles and says, quietly, “Well, guess I can’t argue with that. Love you too, Five.”

Then Five’s expression crumples, and there’s just enough time to see fresh tears falling down his face before he once again buries himself in other-Klaus’ chest. Other-Klaus has a few of them himself, and he ducks his head down into Five’s hair.

Klaus looks around the room. Since he’s the only one (besides Ben) who heard Five say the l-word before, he’s basically the only person not frozen in shock. It’s pretty damn trippy to hear Five directing the word at *him* (even if he’s actually talking to other-him), but this entire week has already sort of led him to give up on logic, so. He can deal.

Next to him, Ben lets out an entirely superfluous breath. “Wow,” he says. “How long did *that* take?”

Other-Klaus lifts up his head a little, to send Ben a glance. Then he shakes his head slightly, tears still falling and a slight quirk on his lips, and goes back to ignoring irrelevant not-Five persons.

Klaus finds that he can understand the reaction perfectly. Obviously Five and other-him’s relationship is different from his and Dave’s (and oh *god,* Five’s disgust reaction from before has an entirely different context now, which means - oh, fuck, he just knows that once they get their wits together Ben is going to rag on him about being right all along), but Klaus knows himself. In the timeline other-him experienced, he wouldn’t have met Dave, and that means he died without ever hearing anyone say ‘I love you’. Not once.

Five saying it - no matter how long it took - would have been the first time. The only person to ever say so and *mean* it, because Five doesn’t say things he doesn’t mean. And by some miracle Five is entirely comfortable with declaring it whenever the mood strikes him, and Klaus can’t imagine that. Not if he tried for a hundred thousand years, he can’t picture

someone loving him so much they'll say so just to let him know. He only got a small - so small, too small - taste of that with Dave, and seeing it now with Five is -

He rubs, absently, at the place over his heart. It hurts a lot, for some reason.

He breathes. In and out. In and out.

After another few minutes, it becomes obvious that Five and other-him aren't going to notice other people without prompting. Klaus wonders if that's a side-effect from being alone with only each other for years.

Klaus shoots a look at his siblings, who are still in varying degrees of shock, and debates with himself for a few seconds. Finally, he shrugs, decides he probably has the best chance of not receiving violence for interrupting, and pads over to the duo on the floor. He crouches down, and before he can think better of it reaches out to tap other-him on the shoulder.

Thankfully, they don't explode immediately upon contact, wiping out the universe with a reality-shattering paradox. Oh, good.

Other-him is cool to the touch. About room temperature. Which makes sense, of course. He doesn't have body heat any more because he doesn't have a body. Otherwise, his skin feels perfectly normal. Klaus withdraws his hand quickly anyways.

Other-him looks up. Klaus tilts his head and gives a smile. "So, I think you might have better luck than we did with keeping him in the infirmary. He really needs it."

He gets a wide-eyed look at that. "What?" Other-him shifts and pokes at Five. "Five? Are you hurt?"

For the first time since other-Klaus appeared, Five tenses slightly. "Um."

"Dammit, Five," other-him curses, and stands up, effortlessly holding onto Five. What, did death make him a bodybuilder too? Other-him glances at Klaus. "Thanks, he'd ignore it forever if he was allowed."

"No problem, other-me!" Klaus gives a little finger-wave (left hand).

Other-him snorts a little. "Just call me Raithe for now, I guess. Come on, Five, we're going to the infirmary."

Five gets whisked away before he can protest, oth-*Raithe* marching out like a man on a mission. Klaus wonders if he should send Pogo after them, but - oh, hadn't Five said Raithe had learned medicine? It's a strange thought, *him* learning *medicine,* but no stranger than anything else revealed in the past twenty minutes.

Klaus pops back up and stretches, looking over at his remaining siblings. Some are still staring at the vacated spot on the floor, some at the doorway. They all have the same identical glazed look, though. God, what Klaus wouldn't give for a camera.

"Well," Ben observes. "That….happened."

Klaus shrugs. His fingers tap on the outside of his leg. He can feel himself starting to come down from his last hit, taken in Vietnam half a day and fifty years ago. He knows he has more drugs in his room - probably more than he can remember, honestly - but the thought of taking more is oddly….repugnant, at the moment. At least this dose is still working.

Instead, he claps his hands, startling his siblings like a flock of mismatched, maladjusted birds. Their eyes all land on him, blinking. Klaus wonders, idly, if anyone else has magic hand-clapping-to-get-attention powers or if it's just him. He wishes he'd discovered this when he was younger, it would have been great.

"Okay!" he says brightly. "I officially declare this intervention a *resounding* success, entirely due to my own efforts and, apparently, existence. You may all applaud now."

Ben is the only one who snorts. "You didn't do anything," he says. Then frowns. "I think. I mean, *you* didn't, *he* - uh -"

Klaus giggles at the mix of frustration and confusion on Ben's face, just because it's such a rare combination. This has the side-effect of snapping a few of his siblings back to Earth.

"What the fuck," Diego says. Really, at this point he should just make that his catchphrase. Klaus says as much to him.

Diego glares back. "Shut up, Klaus."

"That works too," Klaus says thoughtfully. "Doesn't really work on people not named 'Klaus', but apparently there are more of those than we thought, so."

"I -" Vanya takes a step back, and then sucks in a deep breath. "I have to go."

She turns on her heel and flees out the door. Klaus frowns after her.

Diego scrubs a hand over his face. "What the *fuck,*" he says, almost certainly to himself.

Klaus leaves his siblings to recover themselves, and follows Vanya. She's tugging on her coat with quick, jerky motions, her breathing shaky.

"Vanya?" Klaus says uncertainly. His cheek stings with phantom (ha) pain. It wasn't a *hard* slap, at least not by the standards Klaus is used to, but his tiniest sibling packs a surprisingly strong punch. He keeps his distance.

Her eyes dart up to meet his. She pauses, and he notices the fine tremors in her fingers. Those aren't normal, are they? Doesn't playing the violin need steady hands?

"Klaus," Vanya says. There's a storm in her eyes, but unlike earlier it's not entirely directed at him. Her mouth twists unhappily. "I just remembered, I have - a thing."

"Ah, of course," Klaus nods, rocking back on his heels. "And that thing wouldn't be 'getting away from here post-haste', would it?"

An expression flickers across Vanya's face too quickly to see, but then again he's not actually used to seeing expressions on her face. "No, of course not," she lies.

"What's wrong?" Klaus says bluntly.

"Nothing," she says. She walks over to the door.

"Vanya," Klaus says, walking after her.

Vanya opens the door and turns to face him. Her expression is rigid and set, looking at him as if from far away.

"Nothing is wrong, Klaus," she says, looking him in the eye. "I'm glad - Five had someone. I'm glad he learned to say-" she cuts herself off.

Klaus blinks. "Vanya -"

"I'm glad," she says firmly.

Then she slips outside, and the door *bangs* shut behind her.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

> Just to clear things up, the chapters are now switching between Raith->Five->Klaus, in that order.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Five, you *idiot,*" Klaus curses, checking the splint again.

"Yeah," Five says.

"You *fucking idiot,*" Klaus repeats, moving to Five's shoulder.

"Yeah," Five says.

"You *absolute fucking moron,* did you even fucking *try* to avoid injuries?" Klaus winces at Five's torso, half-afraid to even touch it.

"Yeah," Five says.

Klaus looks at him. "You aren't listening to me, are you."

"Yeah," Five says, then blinks. "I am."

"Sure you are," Klaus says.

He lets out a long breath, and leans back on his heels. Five doesn't move his eyes away, barely even blinking, as if Klaus will vanish between heartbeats. Klaus would find it a bit more unnerving if he himself was able to remove his hand from Five's arm. His little brother is warm, the kind of warm Klaus hasn't felt for months now and never thought he would again. *Alive.*

Five lifts his hand up a little, and Klaus grabs it with his free hand (hello). Five's fingers can't close all the way, thanks to the damage to his wrist, and Klaus shots him a Glare of Chastisement (#3) when he tries anyways. Five's fingers loosen immediately, and he looks ready to burst into tears again.

Hoping to head it off at the pass (because if Five starts crying, Klaus definitely will), Klaus clears his throat. It's unnecessary, because he has 110% of Five's attention already, but it helps steady himself.

"So," he says lightly, "I think we might have botched my introduction to everybody."

Five lets out a shaky huff of laughter. “Did we? I didn’t notice.” Then he tilts his head a little. “....Were you explaining things to them?”

Klaus gets an unintentional flashback to his own distraction during their first run-in with The Handler, and that hellish first month at the Facility. He blinks it away and nods in response to Five’s question. “Yeah. Baby-me was surprisingly on top of it, he actually figured out almost everything before I even started talking.”

“I think he’d take issue with that nickname,” Five remarks.

Klaus sniffs haughtily. “Well, when he stops being over two decades younger than me, we can discuss changing it.”

Five snorts, and then his face freezes for a second -

“Fuck, wait, what’s wrong -” Klaus scrambles to gather him in a hug when Five starts crying again.

It takes nearly ten more minutes to soothe Five to to the point where he can speak coherently again. It doesn’t help that Klaus starts crying as well, because *fuck,* he’s *holding Five again,* he thought that was forever denied to him, eternally out of reach. He never once took hugging Five for granted, not with how initially nonexistent and then unwelcome and then only grudgingly tolerated it was, but he thinks he’s reached an entirely new level of appreciation now.

Eventually Five cries himself out (Klaus makes a mental note to give him more water on the regular, because he remembers the aftermath of the Teleportation Incident *very* clearly, and it looks like Five is headed for even greater levels of dehydration). He sniffles a bit, and then, with blank eyes, says, “He’s older now.”

Klaus blinks. “What?”

“The other you. He’s older now. He - there were Commission agents after me, Hazel and Cha-Cha. They kidnapped him. Tortured him. I -” Five’s breath hitches. “I found them, and killed them, they’re *dead,* but Klaus - he was looking through their things, and I wasn’t *watching* him, and - he activated their Briefcase.”

Klaus sucks in a breath. “Oh. Oh, no.” He recalls his younger self in the parlor. Now that he thinks about it, that jacket is *really* not his style. And - he had another tattoo? “Fuck. How long?”

“About a year, he said,” Five mumbles, shaking.

“Fuck,” Klaus repeats. “Did he say where?”

“No,” Five chokes out. “But - he has dog tags, and he was wearing fatigues, and - I think -”

“Fuck,” Klaus says vehemently, and then has to spend the next several minutes dealing with another breakdown from Five.

“I’m sorry,” he sobs, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry -”

“I know,” Klaus says. “I know, Five, I understand, I forgive you.” Because as much as he would love to say it’s not Five’s fault, Five wouldn’t believe that. “I forgive you.”

“No,” Five babbles, “No, no, no, I hurt him, I hurt you, I wasn’t there and I gave them the equations and I *keep hurting you* and I can’t *stop* I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m *sorry* -”

“I forgive you,” Klaus repeats, as Five shakes apart in his arms. “I forgive you, Five, I promise. I forgive you.”

Five lets out the bastard hybrid of a laugh and a sob, and keeps crying.

The key to handling his brother’s meltdowns, panic attacks and nervous breakdowns, Klaus has learned, is to remain steady. Be a rock Five can anchor to, once he’s ready to reel himself back in. Don’t let go of him for a moment. Ramble on about anything appropriate to the situation, and some things that aren’t, because Five will try to stifle his sobs if they’re the only sound in the room. Take deep breaths, Five’s head against his chest, to lead him into mimicking them. Forgive him, always forgive him, although that one isn’t actually so much a deliberate action as just something automatic, steady as the sun.

Klaus isn’t entirely sure if the same methods apply to everyone else, but honestly he really doubts any of his other siblings would allow him to comfort them, so it’s kind of a moot point.

What’s important is that Klaus knows how to handle Five. He’s been doing it for decades now, taken up the role of big brother as best as he was able, and if Five’s little speech earlier is any indication he seems to have succeeded. So Klaus puts his hard-won knowledge to use, and comforts Five as he cries.

Eventually, it winds down again. Klaus looks around, and sighs when he doesn’t see any water in reach. Five has *got* to be dehydrated by now.

Five sniffles a little. “....Klaus?”

“Hm?” Klaus says, carding his hand through Five’s hair. It’s *weird* to have him so small again. He hit a growth spurt just before he turned fifteen, and that was when Klaus still had a limit to how long he could manifest and Five still reacted to physical affection with all the grace of a grumpy cactus, so Klaus has never actually held him for this long when he was this small.

Five scrunches up against his chest to become *even smaller.* “I fucked up,” he says in an equally tiny voice.

Klaus - doesn’t dismiss it out of hand. Five has fucked up before, and he never responded well to trying to sweep it under the rug.

“Well,” Klaus says instead. “Let’s fix it, then.”

“I don’t think we can,” Five mumbles.

“Why don’t I be the judge of that,” Klaus says. “God knows you aren’t exactly the picture of objectivity.”

“Hey,” Five protests immediately. Oh, yay, assertiveness!

“Just telling the truth, baby bro,” Klaus says, and readjusts his hold on Five so he can peer at the bandages again. Still nice and neat and spotless, good. “So, what are you beating yourself up about, exactly?”

“Everything,” Five says, instantly miserable again.

Klaus clucks his tongue. “Now, Five, Diego is a big boy. The decision to make fetish gear his day-wear is entirely his own.”

That startles out a real, genuine laugh, and *oh.* Klaus’ ribcage suddenly shrinks about fourteen sizes. He - he’d forgotten Five’s laugh. He’d *forgotten.*

While Klaus tries to remember how to breathe again (and fails, leading him to just not bother), Five sighs. “Not that,” he says. “I - I mean the equations, Klaus. The ones they used to hurt you. I wrote them.”

“Yeah,” Klaus says. “I kind of figured.”

Five goes rigid. “You did?”

“Yeah,” Klaus says, shrugging. “I got an up-close-and-personal look at The Commission’s best and brightest, and it turns out they’re not actually all that bright.” Really, how difficult was it to stay outside a clearly-marked danger zone? Klaus wasn’t complaining, but *seriously.* “That tech was uncharacteristically competent, it wasn’t hard to realize they stole it from you. You’ve been threatening to figure out how to touch me when I’m incorporeal for years now.”

Five flinches away, but Klaus holds him tighter.

“I don’t blame you,” Klaus says firmly. “You couldn’t have known they were spying on us back then, and it’s not like we expected them to target *me.* I don’t blame you, I never did, and you shouldn’t either. I love you.”

There’s a shaky, shuddering breath from Five, and Klaus has to restart his breathing so his brother can follow along.

“I love you too,” Five says at last.

Then it’s Klaus’ turn to lose his breathing (again), because oh god, he thought he’d never get to hear that again. He buried his face in Five’s hair (and notes that Five really needs to wash it, but later).

They sit in silence for a few more minutes, before Five says, hesitantly, “Klaus?”

“Yeah?”

“How -” Five swallows. “How long did - were -”

“Shh,” Klaus says, placing a hand on Five’s back and rubbing small circles. Thankfully, it works, and Five’s breathing doesn’t become quite *even* but it at least doesn’t get worse. “I don’t know, actually. It’s kind of fuzzy. But I don’t think more than a few months.”

“Months -”

“Hey, hey, it’s alright,” Klaus soothes.

“No it’s *not!*” Five says sharply. “They - they had you for *months,* and they *hurt* you, don’t say they didn’t, they - oh god -”

“Five,” Klaus tries.

“I’ll kill them,” Five says. “I’ll kill them, all of them, they’re *dead,* I’m going to *kill them* -”

“You’re a little late for that,” Klaus sighs.

“....What do you mean?”

“Well,” Klaus hedges.

“Klaus?” Five blinks at him, before a glint of vindictive satisfaction appears in his eyes. “Did you kill them? When you escaped?”

“....Yeah,” Klaus says. He thinks back to the mess he made of Headquarters, how it’s almost certainly all ash by now. “I did.”

“Oh,” Five breathes, and it’s like a string has been cut as he sags against Klaus. “*Oh.* Good. They’ll have to stretch themselves thin to recover from that. Did you get everyone in the Metaphysics Division? And how many others?”

Klaus winces. “No, Five. I mean - everyone. Every single person at Headquarters. They’re all dead.”

Five blinks up at him.

“....Oh,” he says, dazed. Then, *“Oh.”*

“Yeah,” says Klaus.

“Holy shit,” Five says. “Holy *shit.* Klaus - *Klaus,* you just *beheaded The Commission.*”

“Yep,” Klaus says.

He doesn’t….really know how to feel about that. He remembers, back when they began their careers as assassins, that he hated the ‘killing people’ bit. Part of it was selfishness, because of course he didn’t want ghosts hanging around screaming at him, but part of it was that he just didn’t *want* to kill people.

Of course, that was talking about mostly-innocent people who had no idea why they were being targeted by some shadowy organization with a god complex and far too many toys. Killing an entire building full of serial killers - because no matter how they dressed it up, they *were* serial killers - was a little different, especially when they'd spent months treating him as nothing more than a lab rat and gleefully lied about murdering his little brother.

"That," Five says. "That - holy fuck. Klaus, you took out the one thing in our way. We can stop the apocalypse without interference now. We can live past this week without fear of reprisal. We - holy shit, we're *safe*."

Klaus smiles down at Five, and pushes away any regrets. Looking at Five's awed face, they don't even have time to take root. "Told you I'm awesome."

Because, at the end of the day, Five is right. The Commission was always going to be a danger to them - and their family - as long as it existed, and there really wasn't any other option. He doesn't feel *triumphant* about the massacre (it would be a little more than slightly worrying if he did, actually), but - he isn't all that regretful, either.

It's life. Or death, as the case may be.

"I missed you," Klaus murmurs, tucking Five's head under his chin.

Five's arm squeezes tighter. "Missed you too," he says, sounding slightly watery. "I thought - I thought you didn't *exist* anymore, that they killed you for *good.* Not even an afterlife, just - gone."

Klaus shivers. "God, Five, I'm so sorry."

"Not your fault," Five mumbles.

"And not yours either," Klaus reminds him.

"Okay," Five says, and Klaus can tell that he doesn't quite believe it, but baby steps.

"Thought you were dead," Klaus says quietly. "Until I escaped, I thought you were dead. And - well, it's not like I know how to get to the Great Beyond, even if I did get away from The Commission. And you were always the smart one, so it's not like I'd know where to start with the apocalypse if I ever managed to steal a Briefcase and get back here. So I thought - that's it, my whole family's gone for good, won't ever get to see them again, and I'll spend the rest of forever in this fucking torture-tank."

"Torture tank?"

"Shit -" Klaus realizes too late.

It takes another five minutes to reassure Five that yes, everyone at The Commission is super fucking dead, yes, Klaus is very fucking sure, and no, Five can't figure out how to get back there on his own to desecrate the bodies.

"Fine," Five grits out. "But at least tell me they died slowly."

“Uh,” Klaus hedges. “I wasn’t really paying attention?”

“....What do you mean? How can you not notice killing an entire building full of people?”

Klaus shrugs. “I just - manifested all the ghosts in the place. I didn’t personally see everything. Just the aftermath.”

“...Wow,” Five says. “Yeah, that would do it, I guess.” He looks like he’s trying to picture it, expression halfway between pensive and impressed.

Klaus remembers his little scenic tour through Headquarters. He’s seen gorier, but only once, when he was at the Facility and didn’t yet know how to push the ghosts away. It was strange to see the corpses staying so *still,* but not exactly unnerving. He’s well used to death, been drenched in it as long as he can remember, and the remains of Commission Headquarters felt familiar as -

(frozen trees and dirt path and not-skies)

….something. Klaus frowns as he loses his train of thought. He almost tries to recover it, but Five shifts in his arms and he refocuses on his brother.

Five breathes in and out, and Klaus smiles at the steady rhythm (he never thought he’d get to hear it again). He shifts his position a little, to check Five’s bandages again, and then settles down. The only sound is Five’s breathing, and for a moment Klaus could almost think they were back (home) in the apocalypse, just the two of them in the entire world.

They sit in the infirmary in comfortable silence, and for the first time in who-knows-how-long, Klaus feels at peace.

“How’d you learn I wasn’t dead?” Five asks eventually.

“Divine revelation.”

“What?”

“Look, *I* don’t know, just go with it.”

Chapter End Notes

Bit of a slower chapter, but I figure they needed it.

Chapter 27

Five is in the infirmary, the bland walls putting him in mind of some of the less impressive hotels he's been in for the past four and a half years. His wounds are tended to, the bandages snug and clean. He's hardly in pain at all.

Klaus is here. He's not letting go of Five, hasn't stopped touching him since they crashed together ages ago in the parlor. He's holding onto Five like he plans on keeping it up for the rest of forever, and Five can tell when he's deliberately holding back from activating his superstrength to hug even harder, because if he did that Five would probably snap in half. He's not angry at Five, not even mildly annoyed, even though he should be, should be shouting and yelling at Five because he fucked up everything -

Stop. Rewind.

He's not angry at Five. That would be suspect if they hadn't agreed not to lie to each other a long time ago, and kept to it ever since. Five doesn't quite trust his own ability to read people, not 100%, not even the one he knows better than anyone else on Earth. But he trusts Klaus when he says he won't lie, and if Klaus says he's not mad then he's not mad. Five doesn't know why, not really, but he can't say he's entirely surprised. Klaus always was an idiot like that.

The wash of emotion is almost shocking, after the black hole that's been inside his chest for the past several days. Five had resigned himself to doing what his brother wanted at the cost of his brother, but now he has Klaus, he has his *brother* back, the one that raised him and cared for him and loved him unconditionally for the past twenty-two years. The one he never thought he'd see again, the one he helped murder by making the entire thing even possible in the first place -

Stop. Rewind.

The brother he never thought he'd see again is here, in the infirmary, sitting halfway on the bed and holding Five in a hug that's familiar as his own name. Five doesn't want to think about anything else, not his other siblings or The Commission or the apocalypse, just for a while longer, because surely they can have a little while? He just wants to hug his brother, and soothe that crumbling, empty place inside his soul with the knowledge that Klaus is here, he's *okay.*

But -

"Love you, Five."

Five forces himself to breathe evenly. Klaus notices, of course, and his hand rubs circles on Five's back. Five can feel his muscles unclenching, his breaths evening out automatically. He closes his eyes.

He's not a hypocrite. He can acknowledge that if his and Klaus' positions were reversed in that parking garage, he would have done the same thing without hesitation. Five can admit that they're both deeply codependent, ready and willing to do anything to save each other. It never bothered him before, because they could always *handle* it before. Five was always the vulnerable one, much as it grated on him, because it's not like Klaus could get *more dead,* at least not until Five stuck his fucking nose into the quantum realm and worked out the perfect way to hurt his brother and *decided to leave him like that* -

Stop. Rewind.

Klaus was never supposed to be the one who got hurt.

Five hurt him anyways (he's so very good at it).

The only sound in the room is Five's breathing. Klaus' chest is moving, letting Five match the rhythm, but it's utterly silent to the point Five wonders if Klaus has made himself inaudible. If Five keeps his eyes closed, he can almost believe they're back in the bunker's common room, sitting on the couch at the end of the day, too comfortable to get up and go to their rooms to sleep. Well, sleep for Five. More than once Klaus has sat on the couch holding him the entire night through after he fell asleep, which Klaus never actually complained about but was always embarrassing for Five to discover the next morning.

Five sighs, and nestles closer to Klaus, who ceases rubbing circles and instead runs his hands through Five's hair. Five knows it has to be greasy after nearly a week without being washed, but he's gone longer in the apocalypse and he knows Klaus won't make a fuss for a while yet.

Letting himself relax, Five drifts in the quiet. He can't ever truly turn his brain off, but for the moment, it's running idle. He feels himself sinking deeper into the calm, moving towards the first real sleep he's had in days.

Which, of course, is when the door *bangs* open like a crack of thunder.

Five jackknifes up, hand reaching for a weapon he's not carrying, and Klaus is in front of him in less time than it takes to blink. Five's heart leaps in his throat at that, and the edges of his vision go fuzzy for a second.

Then he blinks, and sees the person in the doorway.

Klaus (the younger one, though not nearly as young as he was yesterday) stares at Klaus (the older one, though he won't ever get any older than he is now). His eyes are wild, and his face is - Five blinks and straightens, because he *knows* that face. He's seen it before, and he knew he would see it again, but it kind of slipped his mind a little.

Except here it is: the frantic, desperate hope of someone who's been drowning his whole life, and just got his first taste of air.

"They're gone," Younger-Klaus breathes. "They're *gone.*"

Klaus quirks up the corner of his mouth. "Took you long enough."

“I -” Younger-Klaus says, stumbling. “I thought - I don’t know, my last hit was unusually effective, or something. And I was kind of distracted by the whole - *you* thing. But - they’re *gone. You made them go away.*”

“Yeah,” Klaus says, gently. “I can teach you, I think. It’s tricky, but I can teach you. And I’ll keep them away until then.”

Younger-Klaus sways in the doorway for a second, staring at Klaus with huge, stunned eyes.

Then his face *crumples,* and -

“Okay, just come here,” Klaus says, holding out an arm, and then Five is squished next to two of his brother, one of whom is bawling his eyes out.

Five remembers what Klaus was like when he first realized he could keep the ghosts away. It was - a gift to see that. He cried, just like this Klaus is doing now, at the absolute, crushing *relief* of the revelation that there was truly a way out. Not through pills or needles or bottles, but entirely through his own efforts, making all the ghosts clamoring for his attention go away for *good.*

Five smiles, and leans against his sobbing brother.

Eventually, the sobbing tapers off, although Younger-Klaus doesn’t stop leaning against the two of them. It takes Five a moment to realize he’s fallen asleep. Right. This Klaus is alive, and can do things like that.

“Okay,” Klaus says, carefully maneuvering his younger self into a princess carry. He has to let go of Five for that, and Five ignores the tiny stumble in his heartbeat when he does. Klaus looks around helplessly, but there isn’t another bed in the room.

“Here,” Five says, sliding off the bed. “I want to go back to my room anyways.”

Klaus makes a face at him, but deposits his younger self onto the bed once Five stands. Five locks his knees and ignores how shaky his legs feel.

His brother, however, isn’t fooled, and sweeps him up. Five barely makes a token protest, instead relaxing when Klaus is holding him once more.

“I think we should let him get some sleep,” Klaus murmurs, glancing back at his younger self with a strange expression. Five feels a pang in his heart as he realizes - Klaus is jealous. He never got a peaceful sleep when he was alive, and now he can’t sleep at all. “Fuck knows he needs it. That means you too, Benny-boy.”

A few seconds later, Younger-Klaus stirs slightly, and Klaus puts a finger to his lips. He glares at the corner.

“Yes, Five knows you’re here,” he says. “Five, you didn’t say hi to Ben before?”

“Wasn’t sure how,” Five mumbles, as they leave the infirmary. He lifts up his hand and waves it in the direction Klaus is looking. “Hi, Ben. Thanks for looking after him.”

Klaus tilts his head a little.

“Of course I told Five about you. He believed me right off the bat, even! Probably because he wasn’t at the funeral, but he definitely made ‘favorite brother’ status right then and there….don’t be ridiculous, you don’t count, you’re dead.”

“So are you, and you’re *my* favorite,” Five points out.

“But I’m special. Obviously.”

Five hums absently. “Why don’t you just make Ben corporeal? I want to see him.”

“No can - augh, yes, yes, I can make you corporeal, but - shut up for a minute!” Klaus shakes his head and huffs. “I can’t right now. I burned through a *lot* of myself escaping from The Commission, and I need to recover.”

“What?” Five stiffens as they approach his bedroom. “Klaus -”

“Hold your horses, Fivey,” Klaus says. “I’m fine, just a little low. I should be able to manifest Ben in a day or two, and back to normal within a few more. Promise.”

He squeezes Five tightly, and Five slowly lets his muscles unclench. He still can’t keep away a niggling feeling of worry, because Klaus never did take care of himself very well, but while he’s not 100% confident in his reading of Klaus he’s damn well close. If he says he’ll be okay enough to manifest Ben in a couple days, then he will be.

Five is so busy thinking about when Ben will be corporeal (Five promised to hug him, and he can’t wait) that he misses the the moment Klaus opens the door to his room. He doesn’t miss the way Klaus tenses, though.

His attention snaps to his brother, hyperaware of everything all at once. The room looks deserted, but Klaus must have noticed something, and Five runs through what he’ll likely be able to contribute in a fight -

“Delores?”

Five blinks, and follows his brother’s gaze.

‘....Five,’ Delores says after a stunned pause. *‘Please tell me what’s going on.’*

“Oh,” Five says lamely. “Right. Delores, Klaus escaped The Commission. Klaus, I picked up Delores a couple days ago.”

Klaus blinks, then practically skips over to the bed and plops down next to Delores. “Oh, thank god,” he says. “You had someone to talk some sense into you while I was gone. Delores, it’s *lovely* to see you again, you would not *believe* what the past several years have been like without you.”

‘Hello, Klaus, it’s wonderful to see you too,’ Delores says. *‘And I think I have a slight inkling.’*

“Hey,” Five complains. “I’m right here.”

Klaus pats his cheek. “We know, *liebling,*” he says. Then, at Delores. “I know, right? His physical body finally matches his emotional age! God has finally taken pity on us!”

“I thought you were *dead,*” Five reminds him, voice wobbling on the word.

Klaus hugs him tighter. “I know,” he says, quietly. “I know.”

Then he shakes his head and gives a smile. “But you don’t have that excuse for for how you mooned over Delores after we started at The Commission. Once I learned to banish ghosts and you didn’t have to worry about me every second, you went into hardcore pining mode, little brother. Don’t deny it. You practically wrote soliloquies about her!”

‘He did?’ Delores asks, looking at Five with interest. Five’s eyes widen.

“Oh, all sorts of kinds,” Klaus says, mischief bubbling in his tone. Five smacks him, but he continues regardless. “Once a couple months after we started, we were on a job, and he saw a mannequin in the window of a store, and he went inside -”

“Klaus!” Five hisses.

“- and *asked them to pass a message to you,* which was basically comprised of ‘I miss you so much, I love you more than math itself, I think of you every day’ -”

Five hits Klaus again, and this time he dissolves into laughter. Five looks at Delores, his face a blazing scarlet.

She’s actually *smiling,* though.

‘That’s very touching, Five,’ she says. *‘Thank you.’*

For some reason, that makes the whole thing that much more embarrassing. Five blushes deeper, and hides his face in Klaus’ chest (the traitor).

Speaking of Klaus, he’s now addressing where Ben must be standing. “- you mean? This is Delores, our bosom companion in the apocalypse and Five’s girlfriend, although if you ask me they should just tie the knot already, it’s been seventeen years. Honestly, Five, didn’t you tell them anything?”

“....Uh,” Five says, and winces. “Not really.”

Klaus looks at the corner again and blinks. “Well, convincing you guys of *that* was always going to be a coin flip. I didn’t think of Allison’s rumors, though, that was smart.”

It takes Five a second to realize what they’re talking about. “The apocalypse? The rumoring wasn’t my idea, actually. They just got fed up with me.” He huffs.

“Goodness,” Klaus says, ruffling his hair. “What an unfamiliar feeling.”

Five makes a face at him.

Klaus snickers at him, then looks at where Ben is again and tilts his head. “Hm? Why?.....Yeah, so?.....Should I?.....I don’t see what you’re confused about, Delores is lovely. She was the only other person on the planet with any fashion sense, I couldn’t have stayed sane without her. Speaking, of, Five, what the fuck are you wearing, we're getting you new clothes right after we save the world and be thankful I'm waiting that long." Then, back to Ben, "And let me tell you, I *definitely* would have strangled Five when he was going through his emo phase if Delores hadn’t been around.”

“I didn’t have an emo phase,” Five says automatically.

Klaus pats his head. “You definitely had an emo phase, *bruder*. Like, you had a much better excuse than me for it, what with the whole ‘living in wreckage, surviving off scavenged scraps, talking to your dead brother all the time’ thing you had going on - actually, wait, that was me as well, I guess both our emo phases were justifed….Shut up, Ben. And I still don’t see why you’re so fixated on Delores.”

Five tunes out the argument after that, instead choosing to close his eyes and rest his head against Klaus’ chest. It’s steady and solid, and for the first time since he made his jump through time he’s grateful for his reduced size. He truly feels like a child again, like that first time Klaus held him after manifesting, and just like then he can’t even imagine letting go. Which would look deeply ridiculous if he was physically thirty-five right now, but as he noted before there are things he can get away with looking like a child that he wouldn’t be able to otherwise.

Put like that, maybe his little time-travel mistake isn’t all that bad.

Five can feel his own heart beat, beat, beating away inside his chest. The sound is soothing, even moreso because it’s the first time in days that it’s been so steady. There’s no answering echo of it in Klaus’ chest, but Five grew used to that years ago. It’s grown almost comforting, in a way. It’s a unique identifier, a way to instantly realize the person holding him. Not that Five has been held by literally anybody else, ever, but whatever.

Klaus takes away one of his hands to gesture wildly, and Five tunes back into what he’s saying.

“- completely barmy! Seriously, I don’t know how Luther handled four years all alone, poor guy. I was going spare after a couple months. And after I figured out how to manifest she just stuck around. Five said she was the only decent conversationalist on the planet, which, rude. But probably true. But she was also the only person on the planet with more than two braincells, so.”

“Do I have to remind you who, exactly, is the genius here?” Five interjects. He sends an apologetic face at Delores, but she waves it off. She’s *well* used to sibling rivalry by now.

“Says the guy who thought Twinkies had an endless shelf life,” Klaus retorts. He snorts and looks at Ben. “No, I scared him off with the recounting of how *I* discovered that, but it was a

close call….Hey, don't *you* go saying it was traumatizing, you're not the one who had to *live* it."

Five makes a face at his brother. Klaus pays it no more mind than usual, rolling his eyes and tossing his head like he always does (and Five's heart clenches at that all over again, because how long before he started to forget little quirks like that? The way Klaus taps his shoulder with two fingers instead of one, the exact shade of his preferred mascara, how he runs his hands through his hair when he's nervous? Five nearly lost him, nearly doomed his memories to fade away like the faces of the siblings he left behind, nearly had nothing left besides the younger version of Klaus, who didn't know Five from Adam and acted just enough like his older self to look like a twisted funhouse mirror).

Klaus is looking at Five now, and it takes a couple seconds for Five to realize he missed a question. "What?"

"I asked what you have so far on the apocalypse," Klaus says. "Did you find the owner of the Eye? Where are we at?"

And just like that, Five's mood plummets.

Chapter 28

Klaus opens his eyes, and for a few long, breathless seconds, he thinks he's dead.

Because - incredibly, impossibly, incomprehensibly - it's *silent.*

The kind of silent he's chased his whole life, that's always just out of reach, that other people get for free and don't think twice about. The kind he's only ever reached a handful of times in his life, after taking too many pills or needles and feeling his heart stutter-stumble to a stop. The kind he's wanted ever since he knew it existed, in some far-off land he couldn't quite picture but pieced together out of tattered hopes and desperate imagination.

For a few seconds, he doesn't dare move, terrified that the entire thing will shatter at so much as a breath (wishing with all the strength of a lifetime that if this is really what death is like, he can stay this time).

Then he remembers. Raithe. Older-him. The one who learned how to keep the ghosts away, and promised to teach him how.

Finally, Klaus breathes out.

And for the first time in his life, it's the loudest sound in the room.

****

It's almost noon.

Klaus organized Five's intervention sometime around ten o'clock yesterday, and it turned into a homecoming party somewhere around half-past, and then he sort of lost track of time for a bit. But he's pretty certain he fell asleep no later than midnight or so (after crying on himself, which would be embarrassing if Klaus ever deigned to feel such pedestrian things as embarrassment). So that means he got nearly twelve full hours of sleep.

He can usually only get that much when he's so high out of his gourd he can't remember his own name (either of them).

Obviously it's not going to be repeated anytime soon. Ghosties are only sometimes the reason he catapults out of sleep a few hours in. Mostly it's nightmares, sometimes the creeping itch of withdrawal, occasionally some sound his brain interprets as dangerous (it usually is, but that's no reason to interrupt his sleep, god). Klaus isn't naive enough to think he's going to be sleeping the whole night through on a regular basis now.

But - he might be able to *sometimes.* Now that it's finally, *finally* silent.

Klaus lies in the infirmary for a long, long time, just listening to himself breathe.

Then, slowly, he gets out of bed.

His nails *click* against the plastic of the infirmary bed as he stands. There's a small *pop* from his spine as he straightens. His dog tags *clink* against each other as he walks.

The door *creaks* upon being opened. His footsteps echo in the hallway as he goes down it. He trails his fingers along the wall, and it produces a faint *ssssss,* the sound of skin on paint.

He's never heard that sound before. It's nice.

Everything is so *still.* It's like he's been transported inside a photograph. There's no flickering in the corners of his vision, no creeping shadows beneath his feet. He has to look out a window and watch the wind flutter through the trees to make sure he hasn't been frozen in time.

Klaus hears a sound behind him, a soft *thump, thump,* and he turns to see it.

Allison blinks at him. "Klaus, hi. Or - Raithe?"

That actually garners a laugh - and then Klaus touches his throat, startled. Has his laughter always been that loud? Wow, no wonder he always annoys everyone.

"I'm Klaus, *ma soeur,*" he says to Allison. "You can tell because I don't have a tiny crying genius clinging to me. Doesn't go with my apparel at all, that."

Allison gives a small smile. "Yeah, that - uh, that was - something."

"You're telling me?" Klaus flaps a hand (hello). "I was mostly sure I was hallucinating the whole time."

"You're not the only one," Allison mutters. Then she looks at him and straightens her shoulders. "But I was actually trying to find Raithe so that I could thank him. For looking after Five all these years. At least one of us was there for him."

Klaus doesn't really know how to feel about the fact that his sister wants to thank his future self for taking care of their younger-older brother after their deaths. From the look on her face, she doesn't know how to feel, either.

He doesn't really know how to react to the concept that he actually apparently *raised Five* in an *apocalyptic wasteland* while *being a ghost.* Every single one of those aspects is more than a little outlandish, and putting them all together just sounds like word salad.

"Well," Klaus says at last. "Apparently I'm unexpectedly good at childcare - which makes me a *teeny* bit suspicious about Raithe's identity, but if this whole thing gets any more convoluted my brain is going to melt into a puddle of goo, so I guess I'll accept that - and I was literally the only viable candidate, so."

Allison flinches slightly, at that. She nods, and crosses her arms uncomfortably. Her eyes skitter across the walls.

Klaus, as he always does, ignores the aura of awkwardness and barrels on ahead regardless. "I would be happy to accept your thanks on behalf of my older self, though, if you'd like."

He flutters his eyelashes at her and strikes a pose like he's just heard he'll be receiving an award.

She snorts, and some of the tension melts out of her. "Oh god, he *is* older than you, isn't he? Than all of us. How much, though….?"

Hiding a wince (because *he's* older than all his siblings bar Five, now, and it's an unsettling realization no matter the fact that he wouldn't trade those ten months for anything), Klaus hums. "Well, Five said it's been twenty-two years, so - holy shit, he's over *fifty.* What the *fuck.*"

"What the fuck," Allison repeats in agreement, expression dazed. There might as well be a flashing neon sign over her head saying 'Does Not Compute'. Klaus is pretty sure he has a matching one.

"Wow," Klaus says. *"Wow."* Then something occurs to him, and he can't help but let out a giggle. "Oh god, I *never* thought I'd live to fifty, or even thirty. And it looks like I was right!" And wrong at the same time, because he is, chronologically, thirty right now. All they need is a couple of cat ears to be called Schrodinger. He graduates to full-on cackling.

Allison looks kind of uncomfortable at that, which is entirely uncalled-for, that's *hilarious.* He nudges her elbow and gives her a grin.

She gives a weak smile in return. Lazy, lazy. She's an *actress,* Klaus has a feeling he's not getting her best performance here. He snorts and rolls his eyes.

"Anyways," he says. "I'm sure he'll appreciate the thanks, dear sister. I think everyone else is in too much shock to think of it. Oh! Perhaps you can give him one of your trophies! Knowing myself, he's already awarded himself an entire shelf, but it would mean *so much* coming from family. Make sure it's shiny!"

"....Sure," Allison says, shaking her head and smiling for real now. "The shiniest."

Klaus claps his hands and squeals.

"I think Vanya will want to thank him too, eventually," Allison adds. "You know she and Five were close, she always hoped he was okay. I'm not sure why she left so suddenly last night…."

Klaus feels the grin drop from his face. "Uh."

Allison's gaze sharpens. "Klaus?"

He waves his hands. They make a *whooshing* noise as they move through the air. "It's nothing! Nothing at all! Hey, you were looking for Raithe, right, I should let you get back to that -"

His sister's hand reaches out to grasp his arm as he tries to move away. Klaus stills.

"Klaus," Allison says, voice like iron. "What happened with Vanya?"

“Look, I don’t think she’d want to be gossiped about like this, so -” Klaus tugs on his arm.

“Tell me,” Allison says - demands, really. And Klaus knows his sister well enough to realize that the next step is a rumor, shit -

“Anxiety!” Klaus blurts.

Allison blinks, and her grip loosens. “What?”

“Yeah, she, uh,” Klaus says, mind racing. “She had an anxiety attack. That’s why she left so fast. Didn’t want us to see it. I mean, if anything can justify an anxiety attack last night would really do the trick, that was a pretty big shock, but it’s kind of a private thing, you know?”

“I - of course,” Allison says, fully letting go of him now. She looks - almost *ashamed.* Klaus almost feels bad about lying. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have pried.”

“Oh, please, this family knows nothing of boundaries,” Klaus says lazily.

Allison sighs. “Ain’t that the truth.”

Klaus sticks his hands in his pockets and nods. He’s not sure *exactly* why Vanya ran out, but he has a fairly good guess. And the last thing she needs right now is the entire family descending on her and messing up however she’s coming to terms with Five’s transformation into an emotionally open and physically affectionate person.

Sighing again, Allison runs her hands through her hair and looks off into the distance.

“You know,” she says suddenly. “I tried to help her with her anxiety once?”

“Really?” Klaus says, and he can’t keep the surprise from his tone. It’s justified, though. Allison wasn’t a *sociopath* or anything when they were kids, but she was definitely one of the more self-absorbed of them. Which was saying a *lot,* considering what little assholes they all were.

“Yeah,” Allison shakes her head. “When we were really little, like four. She had to be quarantined - I think her anxiety put stress on her immune system, or something? It was pretty bad, we couldn’t see her for a long time. Dad actually came up with the idea, and he had me try rumoring her to think she was ordinary.” She sighs again. “Didn’t work, obviously.”

“Well,” Klaus says, leaning back against the wall. “At least the pills do the trick?”

“And that’s good,” Allison says. “Still, I wish I could have helped her. That’s - pretty much the only good thing I’ve tried to do with my rumors, and it didn’t even *work.* I don’t even know *why,* it just -”

She cuts herself off, and scrubs a hand over her face. This time, Klaus is the one who looks around uncomfortably.

“....I should spend time with her, once this is all over,” Allison says. “I’ve been wanting to, but between Five and The Commission and apparently the *apocalypse* and -” she makes a movement towards her throat, but twitches her fingers away at the last moment “- other things, I haven’t been able to. It’s not right, the way we treated her growing up.”

“Nothing about the way we grew up was right,” Klaus says, shrugging and looking away.

“....Maybe not,” Allison says. “But we’re adults now. We can’t blame our problems on anyone but ourselves.”

She has a melancholy look on her face, like she’s repeating something she heard someone else say. Maybe she is. She has a therapist, doesn’t she? Klaus hears those are useful, sometimes.

When Klaus doesn’t say anything, Allison turns and walks away. Her shoes make soft *thump, thump* sounds as they hit the floor.

Klaus leans against the wall, and listens to the silence.

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“I was thinking of getting sober,” Klaus says to Ben.

Ben looks up from the book he’s reading (he’s only ever been able to conjure the one, and he must have it completely memorized by now, but hey, it’s something to do). Then he blinks and straightens. “Wait, really?”

Klaus nods, faux-casually. He’s lounging on his bed, dressed in the bare minimum of clothing to be considered decent, and he can feel the withdrawal kicking in already. It’s been nearly eighteen hours since his last hit, and normally he’d be watching as ghosts flickered in and out of reality by now, the eternal background noise steadily rising in volume.

Except that’s not happening. The room is still bare of anyone besides Ben and Klaus, and the only sound he can hear is the faint *hum* of his fairy lights. He never knew they made a sound at all, and he’s very indignant about missing out his whole life.

There’s still the mundane aspects of withdrawal to deal with, of course. Klaus can feel the familiar itch in his veins, the start of his body’s breakdown even though his mind has been spared. But - he thinks he can deal with that, if he does a little finangling.

“Oh,” Ben says, openly staring. Which, rude. “That - that’s great, Klaus. Right now?”

“No, I was thinking next June,” Klaus snorts, swinging his legs off the bed and rifling through his various hidey-holes throughout the room. He quickly finds the little baggies hidden inside - wow, he’d forgotten about *that* one, it probably isn’t even good anymore. “No time like the present, right, bro?”

“Right,” Ben says, still staring, although he’s starting to gain a small smile. “Do you need anything? I’m pretty sure Raithe would help. Or Five.”

“Raithe is already helping,” Klaus murmurs. He shakes himself, and gathers all the little baggies and makes his way to the bathroom. “And didn’t you say Five is deep in the throes of math with his mannequin-wife?”

“Yeah,” Ben says, still sounding faintly bemused about the mannequin thing. Klaus has no idea why. Their mother is (was) a robot, and Pogo is a monkey, it’s not like they don’t have experience with nonhuman people. Honestly, it’s pretty much the *least* weirdest thing Five has revealed this week. “They’re making something to figure out the apocalypse - I think he called it a probability map? It has a lot of numbers, anyways.”

“Did you ever expect different?” Klaus says with amusement, as he starts ripping open bags and pouring them into the toilet. His instincts shriek at him - fuck, he remembers what he had to do to get *that* one, he can’t believe he’s throwing it away - but he braces himself and forces his hand to press the lever down.

He needs to take a deep breath as the pills swirl away. Spiders skitter up and down his spine, and he has to dig his nails into his arms to ground himself.

They’re all gone. No safety net.

Nervously, he checks his surroundings again. No flickers, not even the faintest hint of screaming or sobbing. Just Ben, looking at him with an unfamiliar emotion in his eyes. Klaus blinks at him, cocking his head in a silent question.

Ben huffs. “I’m proud of you, dumbass.”

Klaus blinks again.

The question bubbles to the tip of his tongue - *I thought there wasn’t anything to be proud of?* - but Klaus shoves it down. He’s probably not serious. Ben has really discovered the joys of sarcasm since he died.

Instead, Klaus shrugs and says, “I need you to check up on Vanya.”

This time it’s Ben’s turn to blink. “What? Why?” His eyes sharpen. “Did something happen after she ran out last night?”

Klaus waves a hand (goodbye). “Not as such,” he hedges. “But she was a little upset, so it would be stalking in the name of good, I swear.”

“....Alright,” Ben says, frowning. “Will you be okay?” *Alone?* the end implies.

Klaus places a hand over his heart. *“Ben,”* he says, absolutely affronted, “Do you really think I can’t survive for an hour or two unassisted?”

“Do you *really* want me to answer that?”

Sticking out his tongue is utterly deserved, Klaus will defend this to his grave. Ben rolls his eyes and leaves.

The next hour is spent finding a decent length of rope. Klaus has no illusions about his willpower when it comes to drugs, and the only way he's going to be able to stick to his resolution is if he has no other options.

He's just started wandering around to find someone willing to tie him up (this would be so much easier if he was in his usual stomping grounds, where it's actually harder to *not* get regularly restrained) when Ben comes back.

"She's fine," he says before Klaus can ask. "She's actually going out of town with a friend of hers, I just caught them leaving."

"Huh," Klaus says. "Well, that's nice - wait, wait, waitwaitwait. A friend, or a *friend?*"

Ben's eyebrows fly upwards. "Uh, I didn't notice. He was - maybe? I didn't know Vanya had a - *friend.*"

"Yeah, she mentioned," Klaus hums. "And she's going out of town with him? Sounds very romantic." His heart twists again, but he pushes it away. If all goes as planned, he'll be seeing Dave again soon enough.

"Somewhere near Jackpine Road," Ben confirms. "A cabin, or something. Huh, good for her. Someone should have a normal relationship in this family."

Klaus wants to protest that assertion, but, well. He's trying to become sober so he can conjure the love of his life, who died before he was born. He really doesn't have a leg to stand on.

"She was always the most put-together of all of us," he nods.

"Who was?" says a voice from behind him.

Klaus whirls around, squeaking. "Diego! Jesus christ, warn a guy, will you?" And really, it's just unfair that he *still* can't hear his brother sneaking up behind him.

Diego just smirks, the asshole. He leans against the wall. "Who were you talking to?" he says, eyes flicking around the room.

"Oh, no one, you know, just crazy old Klaus, always talking to himself," Klaus waves away Ben's unimpressed look. Then he brightens. "But I do have a favor to ask, brother dear."

"What is it, Klaus?" Diego says, sounding long-suffering and not at all like he's inclined to do Klaus a favor.

In response, Klaus holds out the rope.

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Watching Five work has always been awe-inspiring.

He moves without hesitation from surface to surface, which results in a lot of climbing onto furniture thanks to the chalkboards being his actual walls. He writes down equations without thinking, connecting them in seemingly-random patterns. He's completely focused, to the point where Klaus has actually had to bodily haul him away to get him to notice the rest of the world.

Klaus doesn't watch Five at work very often, because no matter how incredible it all is he still doesn't understand a single bit of it. But when he does, it becomes perfectly clear just how brilliant his little brother is.

The probability map covers most of the room. It uses symbols Klaus can't even hope to understand, along with a few instances of what looks like a cross between chemistry and quantum theory. Klaus has no idea what the small doodle of a dog is for, but he knows better than to question Five's methods.

Finally, Five steps backwards. The bed creaks under his weight, Delores tilting to the side a bit. Klaus reaches out and steadies her.

"Well," Five says, staring at the wall. "I think I've isolated a few people whose death could prevent the apocalypse."

"Odds of success?" Klaus says.

"Between forty to fifty percent," Five says, sounding frustrated. Klaus winces. That….is not good odds when betting on seven billion lives.

"How many?" Klaus asks.

"Six," Five says, biting his lip.

Klaus lets out a breath. Five - doesn't quite flinch, but he does curl into himself a little, his shoulders tightening.

"Hey," Klaus says. He reaches out and tugs on Five's ankle. Five falls down on the bed easily, and Klaus pulls him into a hug.

Five relaxes, slightly.

"I'm not mad," Klaus says. "Sure, I wish we could stop it some other way. But it's not your fault. It was the ol' Academy luck and those Commission fuckers."

"...Okay," Five mumbles, and Klaus knows that he isn't entirely convinced. He'll have to work on that.

It's not the prospect of killing people Five is worried about, Klaus knows. His brother has no issues with murder. Any misgivings he might have had when they began their careers at The Commission vanished pretty early on.

No, his struggle is entirely rooted in the fact that *Klaus* dislikes murder, and proposing that on top of everything else that's happened this week has him fearing that Klaus will finally snap at him. Klaus can't pretend to be *happy* about the fact that the only solution Five can come up with involves murder, but he's pretty sure he's literally incapable of being angry at his brother right now.

Not that he's going to tell Five that. He's grown used to being Five's moral compass over the past few years, and it's pretty much a full-time job. Who knows what would happen if Five didn't fear the consequences of disappointing Klaus.

Klaus' morals have had to take a few hits while working for The Commission, though. And while he would fucking *love* for another solution to drop into their laps, he's killed people for less than the end of the world. He's going to have to deal.

"We need a break," Klaus decides. He glances up at the short list of names on the wall. "Is it urgent they die today?"

"By the end of the day, preferably," Five mutters. "Definitely by tomorrow afternoon."

"Alright," Klaus nods. "Well, first *you* are going to eat. Then we can work out a plan of attack."

"I already had lunch," Five points out, irritated.

"And now it's dinnertime!" Klaus says brightly. "Funny how that works."

Five lets out a short growl. "I still have a few temporal anomalies to work through. I can't just stop."

"You also still have to *eat,*" Klaus points out, unbothered by Five's reticence. It's a familiar song and dance by now.

"Can't you just go get something and bring it back?" Five says.

Klaus looks at him. "You'll be okay?"

To his credit, Five actually thinks it over for a few seconds. His shoulders tense under Klaus' hand, before he deliberately relaxes them. Klaus doesn't blame him. He's not too wild about the idea of being away from Five, either. They haven't been out of each other's sight, and rarely out of arm's length, since last night.

But Five nods. "....Yeah. I'll be fine. We can't stay glued together forever."

“Not least because that would become very awkward at certain points,” Klaus observes, then sighs. “Alright. Be back soon, you keep working your mathy magic.”

“It’s not magic,” Five says automatically, but picks up his chalk again regardless. Klaus gives him one last hug (which Five returns fiercely), and leaves.

It’s funny how he can still remember the way to the kitchen clear as day, despite not walking these halls for over twenty years. Klaus looks around at the decor and wow, he thought he might have been exaggerating the air of doom and gloom permeating this place in his memories, but nope. It’s not a tomb (nothing can compare to the actual tomb of his nightmares, and he genuinely doesn’t want it to), but it’s at least somewhat similar.

Klaus is invisible because why not, so when he enters the kitchen he gets to see Luther, putting away the dishes. Klaus stops.

Last night is mostly just a blur of *FiveFiveFive,* so he can’t say he paid much attention to his other siblings, even when he was talking to them. But now, looking at Luther, Klaus feels his heart twist once again. He leans back against the wall.

The last time he saw Luther in the flesh, Five was using all the strength his thirteen-year-old body could muster to push their giant of a brother into a shallow grave. Klaus never liked Luther all that much, and honestly he still doesn’t, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t happy to see him alive.

Luther walks around the table to snag the last of the dishes, and Klaus - frowns.

He straightens up and walks over to Luther. His brother continues moving around, rinsing off the bits of food left on the plate, and Klaus’ frown deepens.

See, the thing is, Klaus is pretty sure he qualifies for a doctorate in medicine by now, and a pretty big part of that is getting a very good picture of human anatomy. And the more Klaus watches Luther moving around, the more certain he becomes that something is *off* about his brother’s body. Luther moves his arms carefully, as if the joints aren’t quite normal, and the way he hunches his back edges just a shade too far into the unnatural. His fingers bend clumsily, and when he breathes, his chest doesn’t expand as much as it should.

Klaus casts his mind back to the first time he lived through this week. He remembers that Luther’s size was a surprise, but he doesn’t think anything was ever explained. And he didn’t know enough to realize that the way his brother moves is subtly *wrong*.

Well. There’s not much chance Luther will answer a direct question, but if all else fails he can just spy some more later. Klaus materializes behind Luther and grins. “Why, hello, there!”

Luther jumps a little and whirls around. “Klaus!” Klaus grins and skips over to him. “Or - Raithe.”

“Aw, how’d you know?” Klaus says, opening the cupboards. Five probably won’t want to waste time eating something big, so quick and easy is the word of the day here. But still healthy and filling, because those injuries are going to need fuel to heal right.

He realizes that he's going to have to go back to the strategies he used to feed Five as a teenager, because he *is* a teenager again. All that time spent making sure Five had balanced nutrition - wasted. At least food is more plentiful this time around.

"You - move differently," Luther says.

Klaus raises an eyebrow and looks over at him. "Do I now," he says. It's hardly unexpected. Younger-him is still alive, still weighed down by a lifetime of drugs and ghosts and fear. Klaus has been free of that for years. He probably moves like he'll float off the ground at any moment, because that's honestly what he feels like, most of the time. Especially now.

"Yeah," Luther says, eyeing him.

"Well," Klaus says. "I could say the same thing. I never found out the reason behind your big beefy frame the last time around, care to enlighten me?"

"You didn't?" Luther looks startled.

"Maybe?" Klaus wiggles a hand. "I actually don't remember the events leading up to the apocalypse very well, which is why we didn't have anything else to go on besides the Eye, and why Five is working his little heart out upstairs."

A look of disapproval slides over Luther's face. "You mean you were high."

"Partly that!" Klaus says cheerfully, nudging Dad's boring old breakfast cereal out of the way and peering behind it. "And also partly because dying kind of fucks with your head, who knew." And *also* partly because he had a psychotic break and exorcised roughly ten billion souls all at once, but Luther doesn't particularly need to know that.

Luther flinches slightly at that. "....Oh. Yeah. It….does."

Klaus stops peering at the food.

He looks over at Luther.

Luther looks away. "I guess everyone else knows already," he says, trying to aim for casual and missing terribly. "The attack on the house - they all saw it. So." He clears his throat. "A few years back, a mission went - wrong. I got hurt. Bad. Dad had this serum, and…."

Hesitantly, he rolls up some of his sleeve. His wrist, and what Klaus can see of his arm, is extraordinarily hairy, and the skin looks leathery and tough. It almost reminds him of Pogo.

"Oh," Klaus says.

"Yeah," Luther says, quickly rolling his sleeve back down and still not looking at Klaus. "So. I don't really want to talk - mph?"

Luther tenses to a ridiculous degree when Klaus hugs him. The shock is so sudden he just stands, frozen, as Klaus squeezes. The size differential is kind of disorienting, especially when Klaus has spent the last several decades hugging just one person, but that's okay.

After several seconds, Luther starts breathing again. “Klaus? What are you -”

“I’m hugging you,” Klaus informs him.

“I - yes, I can see *that. Why* are you hugging me? Get off,” Luther wriggles in his grip. But Klaus has had to deal with *Five,* back when he didn’t want hugs. This is nothing. Luther doesn’t manage to get away.

“Because I want to and you need it,” Klaus says solemnly. Luther tries to push him away, but Klaus channels strength and matches it. He pats Luther’s back. “There, there.”

Luther tries pushing for another few seconds, then lets out a very bewildered breath. “What….”

“Oh, I have superstrength now,” Klaus says cheerfully. “Benefit of being a ghost. I have also rendered Diego, Mom, and Pogo similarly redundant.” He pats his brother’s back again. “Just let me hug you, Luther.”

Klaus feels Luther standing rigid for another few seconds, before, ever so slightly, relaxing. It’s nowhere near comfortable, but it’s a step in the right direction. Klaus holds on for another few minutes, before giving him a squeeze and stepping back.

He gives Luther a smile, who doesn’t seem to know how to react. He hums, and turns back to the cupboards to give his brother time to recover.

“....How old did you say you were again?” Luther asks after a while

“I didn’t, actually,” Klaus says. By now he almost has a meal put together for Five. Three sandwiches, two healthy BLTs and one of those disgusting marshmallow things. It can be a quick source of carbs, but no way is he letting Five eat it first. Klaus looks in the fridge and debates over drinks. Juice or milk? “But I’m about fifty-two, I think. Somewhere around there.” God, he has no idea how to count the time in that tank. He probably won’t ever know his real age for sure.

Luther makes a choking noise. Klaus glances at him and smiles. “I know, right? But you can just think of me as eternally twenty-nine, I sure do.”

Deciding on milk, Klaus pulls it out of the fridge and snags a glass. He feels Luther’s eyes on him like a laser, and briefly debates the merits of de-visibling. Floating plates and glasses won’t be all that attention-grabbing in *this* house, surely.

“I….okay,” Luther says, shaking his head. “Okay, you’re - fifty-two. That’s. Okay.” He shakes himself, and Klaus has to look away because human bodies don’t *quite* move that way. “So what are you doing about the apocalypse?”

Klaus leans back against the counter. He looks at Luther.

“Five did a bunch of math,” he says at last. “Can’t really understand it myself, but he knows this stuff. He’s found a few people whose deaths might avert the apocalypse. We’re taking care of it tonight.”

“You found the people who start the apocalypse?”

“No,” Klaus says, gentling his tone. “Or at least, we don’t think so. We found people whose deaths might cause effects that make the apocalypse less likely to happen, so we’re going to kill them and hope for the best.”

Luther blinks. Then blinks again. “Wait,” he says. “Wait, what - you mean you’re going to kill *innocent people?*”

“Yes,” Klaus says. Bluntly. He always hated the euphemisms The Commission used, hiding behind words like ‘terminate’ and ‘remove’. It’s killing, plain and simple, and he can’t afford to forget that. “We are.”

Luther sucks in a sharp breath, and takes a step back. His face has lost color. “You can’t do that,” he says, faintly. “You can’t just kill innocent people!”

“We’ve been doing it for the past four and a half years,” Klaus says, sighing. He picks up the plate and cup and moves toward the doorway.

He finds his way blocked, however, by Luther. “I won’t let you,” Luther says, crossing his arms and glaring. “K-Raithe, you can’t do this. It’s wrong.”

“Yeah,” Klaus agrees. “But it’s the only way we’ve got.”

“Then think of another way!” Luther says, looming.

“There isn’t one, big guy,” Klaus says, trying to slip around the side of his brother. Luther moves, and his bulk takes up most of the doorway. Klaus frowns. He’s not sure he could get the food through even if he went incorporeal. He sighs. “Lutheroo, could you step aside, Five really needs to eat.”

Luther reaches out to grab his arm. Klaus makes himself incorporeal (except his hands) and raises an eyebrow as his brother’s hand passes right through him. Luther stumbles, not expecting that, and Klaus takes the opportunity to lift the plate and cup over his head as he walks through his brother and into the hallway. He sets off back towards Five’s room.

“Shit,” he hears Luther say, and then he hears the sound of very large feet. “Raithe, *wait,* I’m not going to let you do this!”

“You can’t actually stop me,” Klaus points out, sighing. He doesn’t stop walking.

Luther tries to grab him again, which fails spectacularly. *“Raithe -”*

Klaus lifts his hands a bit so they’re out of the line of fire, but doesn’t otherwise react. Except that draws Luther’s attention to the food, and a glint of understanding appears in his eyes. Klaus barely has time to frown at him before -

the

plate

gets

knocked

from

his

hand.

It falls to the floor with a *crash,* sandwiches splitting apart as they hit the ground. Klaus jolts so badly the cup ends up falling as well, and milk and glass end up spraying everywhere. The entire thing is a mess of soggy food interspersed with shards of glass and ceramic.

Klaus stares at it, numbly.

“Raithe, you can’t just decide who lives and who dies! There’s a better way, I know there is. We just have to find it -” Luther is saying.

“That was for Five,” Klaus interrupts.

“- what?” Luther blinks.

“That was -” Klaus says, still staring, “That was for Five. That was *Five’s food.*”

Luther glances down. “I’ll clean it up later, right now we’re talking about you *killing* people -”

“No,” Klaus interrupts again, snapping his head up. “No, we’re talking about this. What the *fuck,* Luther, you don’t just go *throwing food on the ground,* Five *needs* that!”

“Raithe, there’s plenty more in the kitchen, it’s not important - *ungh!*”

Luther stops talking all of a sudden, breath wheezing out of him, and it takes Klaus a second to realize it’s because he’s channeled strength into himself and shoved his brother up against the wall.

Klaus feels cold inside, and he bares his teeth. Luther stops struggling and freezes, wide-eyed.

“You,” Klaus says, making sure to enunciate clearly. “Do. Not. Waste. Food. *Especially* not Five’s food. Do you understand me?”

There isn’t an answer. Luther remains frozen under Klaus’ grip.

“Do you understand me?” Klaus repeats.

Jerkily, Luther gives a nod.

Klaus releases him. “Good,” he says with glacial calm. He glances at the floor. “Now, I think you should do as you said and clean that up. I’m going back to the kitchen to remake it. *Don't*

get in my way.”

Without waiting for an answer, Klaus spins on his heel and walks back to the kitchen. He should hurry. He’s already been gone far too long.

Chapter End Notes

Klaus: I am going to be the adult this family sorely needs and hug all my siblings' trauma away.
Also Klaus: What no of course I don't have trauma of my own, what makes you think that.

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year, everyone!

It is fucking *ridiculous* for him to be jittery. Five is thirty-five years old, a master assassin and apocalypse survivor, and one of the smartest people alive. He shouldn't be getting - *separation anxiety,* or whatever he's feeling. Klaus should be back any moment.

Five finds himself checking the door again, and jerks his head back around to the chalkboard in front of him with a scowl. He marks down the next sequence of numbers with slightly more force than is entirely warranted.

The chalk breaks in his hand. He hisses.

'Just go find him, Five,' Delores says from where she's sitting on the bed. *'You're aggravating your wrist, and that equation is wrong anyways.'*

Five blinks, and the numbers sharpen into focus in front of him. They are, indeed, wrong. His wrist throbs, a faint pulse of pain even through the painkillers.

He grits his teeth. "I don't need to go find him, he's coming back -"

'But there's a part of you that's scared he won't,' Delores says bluntly, and Five flinches. *'You need to shut that part of yourself up, and he's been gone longer than he should have by now. Go find him.'*

He stands in the middle of the room, his jaw working. His fingers open and close.

Then he spins around and stalks out the door. "Fine," he spits out, and ignores Delores' weary sigh behind him.

Klaus has threatened to drug him unconscious if he tries to jump unless absolutely necessary, so Five has to get to the kitchen the long way. He takes one of the less-used ways so as to avoid running into any of his siblings, because he is *not* in the mood to see them right now.

When he reaches the kitchen, it's empty.

Five spins around, his heart hammering against his ribs. He takes a deep breath. That doesn't mean anything. Klaus is probably back at Five's room by now, wondering where *he* is. He just needs to get back to his room.

It's fine. It's *fine.*

The hallways seem longer this time, more oppressive than they were even in his childhood. Five hurries down them, but they seem to stretch out, denying him any ground. The air suddenly seems thick and heavy, clogging in his throat, sending him staggering to the side.

There's a glint of light in the corner of his eye, and he *whirls* around, only to see sunlight innocently streaming through a window. But he knows what he saw, it wasn't sunlight, it was a silver-blue glow, the color of The Commission's weapons, the ones *he helped make,* they're here, they're *here* and he can't find Klaus, *where's Klaus* -

There's a dark-skinned woman in front of him, kneeling down because he's on the ground for some reason (he's been shot, hasn't he? that doesn't matter, he needs to get to Klaus, needs to *save him*). Her mouth is moving, but Five can't hear her. Distantly, he wonders why she isn't killing him, because he's not putting up much of a fight. He can't get enough air into his lungs, can't make any of his limbs obey him, can't can't *can't.*

Weakly, Five bats at the woman. She catches his arm, almost gently, and he tries to tug it away. He can't muster enough force. His breathing gets faster, shallower. Grey starts to creep into the edges of his vision. There's a high-pitched noise coming from somewhere, the sound of an animal in pain.

The woman's eyes are wide. Her mouth keeps moving, and she reaches out with her other hand. Five flinches back and kicks out with the last bit of his strength. Out of more luck than skill, it connects with her ankle and topples her over. She lets go of his arm to catch herself.

Five snatches his arm back and wraps it around himself. Where's Klaus, where's Klaus, he needs Klaus, where's his brother, he's dead, he's dead, he's deaddead*dead* and it's all Five's fault, *he killed his brother* -

The woman grabs his shoulders and she's looking him in the eyes with a half-apologetic, half- resolute expression. He tries to jerk back, but she presses him against the wall and he can't get away. He sees her mouth moving, and even through the haze he can just hear the words -

"I heard a rumor that you -"

Which is as far as she gets before she gets *ripped* away and thrown to the side. The world is a blur of noise and color, and Five gasps and jerks before -

- Klaus scoops him up.

Instantly, *instantly,* Five grasps onto his brother, his brother who's *here* and *okay* and not a soup of silver-blue light. He buries his head in Klaus' chest and sobs.

Klaus' arms are strong and solid around him, just like last night, and Five finds himself gasping and crying all over again. Nothing else matters, nothing at all, not now that he knows Klaus is safe and here and not in the grasping hands of The Commission (a torture-tank, he said, a *torture-tank*).

Five shakes and cries, and very distantly, he can hear -

"- then *you fucking get me,* you don't *fucking rumor him!*"

"He was getting violent -"

"Maybe if you weren't fucking *suffocating* him he wouldn't feel the need to do that! It's a *panic attack,* not something you can just brainwash him into ignoring!"

"I - I was -"

"Save it," Klaus squeezes Five tighter, and takes a deep breath. "Just save it. We're leaving now. Unless you want to see if you can rumor a ghost?"

There's silence.

Klaus turns around and walks away, Five still clinging to him. He starts murmuring to Five, and Five focuses on his brother's voice, just like always. "You're okay, Five," and Five wants to laugh, because he doesn't care if *he's* okay. "Just breathe. Follow my breathing. In and out, okay? In and out."

Five sucks in air, follows the motions of Klaus' chest as it rises and falls. They come to a stop, and Klaus sits down on the ground. Five wriggles until his chin is on Klaus' shoulder, and struggles to slow down his breathing.

"Hey, remember when we found the grey car?" Klaus says idly, rubbing a hand up and down Five's back. "You fucking adored that thing, thought it was the best thing since marshmallows. I never understood why. It didn't have a single bright color on it, at least not until I found a working bedazzler. I know it was easy to take care of, but honestly, I liked the red one better. Now there was a car with *style.* You can't even compare the two. Okay, fine, the red one broke down a lot more, but you have to make some sacrifices for fashion. And I guess it was easier to find spare parts for the grey one. But the red one looked *beautiful* with my additions, you have to admit."

Five lets out a weak laugh. He does remember. Klaus *somehow* found an entire rainbow of spray paint cans, and went a little nuts in the subsequent decorating. By the end of it all, the red car couldn't truthfully be called *red* anymore. Not to mention the basement bunker, which Five had to vacate for nearly a week thanks to Klaus forgetting about little things like paint fumes.

At least it looked much more cheerful afterwards. And Klaus let Five eat whatever he wanted for the whole week out of guilt, though he put his foot down after the entire carafe of espresso. Which was probably for the best. Five can't actually remember anything after the sixth cup, and Klaus twitches whenever he asks about it.

He relaxes further and lets Klaus's words wash over him in a comforting tide. Klaus moves on to talking about the time he challenged Five to a triple-length game of Ghost Tag, which Five accepted out of pure pride and stubbornness, and the hilarious aftereffects of that (although Five would object to that adjective). It then segues into Klaus musing about possible Ghost Tag grounds in the present, which is an interesting thing to think about. They

haven't been able to play very much since entering The Commission, thanks to always having to either carry out a job or being on standby for the next one.

"Obviously we can't play in the city," Klaus says, sounding disappointed. "Don't want to scare the mundies. But there are plenty of places elsewhere. Remember that time we went to the Grand Canyon? That was a *great* game."

"It was," Five agrees.

"He speaks!" Klaus says, leaning back slightly and smiling. "Back with us?"

"Yeah," Five says. "I - yeah."

"Good," Klaus says, squeezing him briefly. "You scared me, you little asshole."

Five winces. "Sorry," he murmurs.

"Nah, I'm sorry," Klaus sighs. "I ran into Luther, the big lunk took a wee bit of an issue with how we're planning to resolve the apocalypse issue. Had a bit of a delay. Your food is back in your room, feel up for eating?"

Five looks around the room they're in for the first time, and realizes they're in one of the myriad of sitting rooms throughout the house. He honestly doesn't know which one, they all look the same to him.

He evaluates himself. "I think so," he says. Now that he thinks about it, he *is* hungry. "Yeah."

"Excellent," Klaus says brightly. He slides his arm under Five's knees and stands in one smooth motion. "Let us adjourn, then."

Five rests his head on Klaus' shoulder and closes his eyes. The darkness is an old enemy of Klaus', he knows, but it's actually quite soothing for Five. It reminds him of the times when he was young, before they started going on missions, and either Vanya or Ben would sneak into his room and crawl into bed with him, shyly asking if it was okay. He remembers, in the quiet darkness of the night, that it felt like he could protect them.

He hopes he made them feel how he feels right now, with Klaus humming tunelessly, his brother's arms around him.

It's then that he hears - crying?

And - he knows who that is, it's -

Five experiences a brief moment of cognitive dissonance, before he remembers that right, there are two versions of Klaus running around right now. And if *his* Klaus is right here, then the one that's crying has to be Younger-Klaus.

He blinks his eyes open. "Klaus," he says.

"Hm?" Klaus says, slowing to a stop.

“Do you hear that?” Five says.

Klaus tilts his head and frowns a bit. He blinks. “Huh,” he says. “Where’s that coming from…..?”

“Upstairs?” Five says, tensing a bit. He….might not be so good at handling hearing Klaus in pain. The faint sobs prickle against his skin.

“Okay, okay,” Klaus says, trotting up the nearby stairs. “Hold on, it’s okay - Ben? Mini-me?”

It’s another minute or two before they find Younger-Klaus, and Five flinches to see him *tied to a fucking chir, what the fuck.* He scrambles down from Klaus and rushes over to Younger-Klaus, tugging on the rope. Visions of Hazel and Cha-Cha dance through his mind, and he feels his breathing pick up.

“What -” Younger-Klaus jerks. “Hey, wait, Five, what are you -”

“Who did this,” Five hisses, his heart beating frantically against his ribs. “Who did this, where are they, what -”

“What - wait, no, no, Five, I asked for this, I want to do this -”

“Five,” Klaus says, putting a hand on his shoulder. “He’s detoxing.”

Five’s fingers slip from the ropes, and he sucks in air. “Oh,” he says distantly.

Klaus bodily turns him around and hugs him again, running his hand through Five’s hair, and Five realizes he’s shaking.

“It’s alright,” Klaus says. “Five, it’s alright. He’s not hurt, I promise. I’m right here. We’re both okay.”

There’s a faint rustling from behind him, and Younger-Klaus’ voice says, hesitantly, “Uh….yeah, I’m - fine. We’re both fine?”

It takes a couple more minutes for Five to stop shaking. Klaus doesn’t let go of him the entire time.

He feels Klaus shift a bit, and guesses he’s looking at Younger-Klaus. “So,” he says, “Might I ask what brought this on? Not that I’m not supportive, of course, but I was actually expecting a bit more opposition to the idea of getting clean. I had all these plans, it’s really very rude of you to pre-empt them.”

That startles a laugh out of Younger-Klaus. “Oh, you had *plans,* huh?”

“Oh yes,” Klaus nods. “Think that one time with Jackie plus all of Ben’s pushiness, *and* the chocolate pudding. Not waxing, the *other* use.”

“....Damn,” Younger-Klaus says after a moment, sounding impressed. “You really thought this through.”

“Absolutely,” Klaus nods again. “I remember what I was like. Which begs the question once again: why now?”

Five thinks back to their conversation in the infirmary. The way Klaus held the dog tags around his neck, the look in his eyes as he said *‘I’m going to try to get sober.’*

Looks like he’s following through.

Sure enough, there’s a pause, then Younger-Klaus clears his throat. “Did Five tell you about my little - jaunt?”

Five peeks his head out of Klaus’ chest as his brother replies. “Yeah. A year, that’s - well, congrats on making it to thirty. You beat me, at least.”

A soft huff of laughter. “Crossed my mind. And it was ten months, technically.” His voice goes soft. “Long enough to fall in love.”

“Ah,” Klaus’ voice is suddenly filled with understanding.

“Yeah.”

Klaus hums a bit. “Name?”

“Dave,” Younger-Klaus says. Five sneaks a glance at him, and almost gets knocked breathless at the sheer amount of *love* on his face. Five hasn’t seen that look directed at anyone else before. “His name was Dave. We soldiered together in the A Shau Valley near the Mountain of the Crouching Beast.”

It was one thing to guess that Klaus had ended up in a war, and another thing entirely to hear it confirmed. Five flinches, his heartbeat ratcheting skywards. Klaus starts rubbing circles on his back as he grins at his younger self.

“A soldier boy, huh? How were his *guns?*”

Younger-Klaus laughs loudly. “*Lethal weapons,* baby.”

The puns are enough to garner a snort from Five, his heartbeat calming. Klaus grins down at him, before looking back at his younger self.

“Did he love you?”

There’s a hitch in Younger-Klaus’ voice when he responds, touched with wonder, “Yes.”

“Wow,” Klaus breathes, with the same awe.

Five detaches himself from Klaus and turns to fully face Younger-Klaus. He looks - well, he looks exactly like a junkie halfway through withdrawal. His face is waxy and wan, a bit of smudged makeup under his eyes. There are fine tremors wracking his body, and he’s breathing like it’s taking more effort than normal.

“He sounds incredible,” Five says.

Younger-Klaus squints at him. “I literally just said two things about him.”

Five shrugs. “But he loves you, and you him. Good enough for me.”

Younger-Klaus blinks slowly at Five, and something - shifts, in his face. Settles. A line in his shoulders relaxes.

“Thanks,” Younger-Klaus says, a little softer.

Five isn’t entirely sure what he means by that, but he nods anyways. Five sighs, and leans against Klaus, and looks around. “Is Ben here?”

“Nah, he fucked off once I got to the bitchy stage of withdrawal,” Younger-Klaus says cheerfully. “I have been just *starved* for conversation, let me tell you. And might I say, it’s super fucking weird to hear someone else acknowledge Ben. How long did it take to convince you?”

Now it’s Five’s turn to blink. He sighs. “I believed it right away. Because, and I’ll say it again, *it is literally your power.*”

“He was salty about no one else remembering that,” Klaus mock-whispers. “It was *adorable.*”

“Aww,” Younger-Klaus says with a grin. “Wait, did he do that thing where he sort of puffs up -”

“Yes! Yes he did!” Klaus says with a giggle. “And he was annoyed about the part where he took half half the Academy’s intelligence when he left -”

“- and Ben took the other half!” Younger-Klaus crows, with a matching grin.

“Clearly, it was a mistake to let you two interact,” Five mutters.

He gets two identical wide grins, and twitches.

Then Klaus’ face slides into a more thoughtful expression. He looks over at his younger self, who blinks and tilts his head.

“....You know,” Klaus says hesitantly, picking his words carefully, “I never actually experimented with *summoning* ghosts as opposed to pushing them away, because why would I. But - I have a lot more control over my powers than you. I could - see if I can’t try to reach Dave?”

Younger-Klaus stops *breathing.*

“Yes,” he says, breathlessly. *“Yes, please.”*

“Okay,” Klaus says. He tilts his head and frowns a little, closing his eyes in concentration. “This might take a while, I don’t - mph!”

Klaus jerks a little, and Five reaches out to steady him, looking up in alarm. Klaus blinks his eyes open, and looks towards the corner of the room.

Where Younger-Klaus is looking as well, mouth open, tears in his eyes.

“Dave.”

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Guess who just started their NEW JOB! Yay!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Klaus.”

Hearing Dave say his name, when just hours ago he wasn’t sure he’d ever hear that again, is...a gift. Klaus strains against the ropes, looking at *DaveDaveDave,* not even blinking because what if that makes him go away?

He doesn’t need to struggle, though, because Dave closes the distance himself. He hurries over to Klaus’ side, and holds out his hand, hovering just inches above Klaus’ cheek, and fuck, Klaus has never hated the whole incorporeal thing more than he does now. Dave’s eyes are on him, and oh, *oh,* Klaus could live on that look alone.

“You’re here,” Klaus murmurs.

“Of course I am,” Dave says. Somehow, Klaus forgot how beautiful he is, even though it hasn’t been two days since he last saw him. “Of course I am.”

Klaus smiles, and he feels tears rolling down his face. He doesn’t much care about that, though, because *Dave* is here. The entire rest of the world is now currently irrelevant.

There’s still that horrible, horrible wound on Dave’s chest, dripping blood. But Klaus reminds himself to *breathe,* and focuses on Dave’s face instead. That wonderful, beautiful face. It creases into a beaming, open smile, and god, if Klaus wasn’t thoroughly gone already that would be his downfall.

“I missed you,” Klaus says. It feels inadequate, that. It doesn’t encompass how his heart was ripped in two, how losing Dave felt like losing himself - what little there is left to lose, anyways. How a part of himself (a larger part than he’ll ever admit to anyone) contemplated picking up a gun instead of that briefcase.

“I missed you too,” Dave says, blinking rapidly himself. “It’s been - too long.”

Before Klaus can respond to that, a floorboard creaks. They both look over to it.

Raithe sighs, his hand firmly on Five’s shoulder. They’re nearly out the door.

“Damn,” Raithe says. “Almost made it.”

Klaus giggles. Maybe he should be upset with his big reunion with the love of his life getting interrupted, but this is probably karma for ruining, like, every single moment of his siblings' that he could when they were younger. And he still *has* the love of his life, so everything else is basically semantics.

"Enjoying the Kodak moment, oh brothers o' mine?" he calls out.

Dave blinks, taking in Raithe and Five. "Oh," he says, comprehension dawning. "Hello, there."

"Hello, Davey-boy!" Raithe says, grinning. He nudges Five. "Five, say hello to Dave. He's right there," Raithe points at Dave.

Five nods, his eyes clearly not focusing on Dave's face but getting the location approximately right. He waves. "Hi, Dave. Thanks for taking care of him."

"My pleasure," Dave says, which Raithe repeats for Five. Dave looks at Raithe. "So you must be Ben? Klaus, you didn't tell me you were twins."

Both Raithe and Klaus blink.

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"Uh," Five says. "What was that about."

Sadly, Klaus is still restrained, so he can't wipe away the tears streaming from his eyes. The entire room is a blur of shadows and color, the last of their laughter still bouncing off the walls. Klaus giggles again, and the hard surface of the floor rubs against his cheek.

Dave kneels down next to him, looking both confused and alarmed. Upon catching sight of his face, Klaus can't help but break into another round of wheezing laughter.

"Oh god," Raithe says, from where he's collapsed against the wall. "Oh god, I haven't had a laugh like that since Five accidentally told a coworker we were sleeping together. Dave, you're a keeper. I fully approve."

"Five *what,*" Klaus gasps out, to the background of Five's alarmed and panicked denials. "Oh god. Oh god, you need to tell me that story."

"All in good time," Raithe grins, ignoring Five's furious snarls of *'no you fucking won't, Klaus, don't you fucking dare, you fucking -'* "All in good time. But right now," he takes a deep breath (entirely just for show, Klaus notes with amusement), and looks at Dave. "No, Dave, I am not Ben. I don't have nearly enough common sense. But that's overrated, anyways."

"Okay," Dave says slowly. He looks between Klaus and Raithe. "So…"

"Right," Klaus says, his giggling trailing off. "Right, so. Um, Remember how I told you my family is an eleven on the weirdness scale? This is, like, *fifteen.*"

“Sixteen,” Raithe corrects. “Four times four.”

“Oh, you’re right,” Klaus nods.

“Ugh, not this again,” Five mutters.

“Anyways,” Raithe says, ignoring Five (probably through long practice), “The short version is that I am *also* Klaus. Just a different one.”

Dave blinks.

“What.”

“He’s me from a different timeline, babe,” Klaus interjects. “One where we never met, most relevantly, so clearly I got the better deal in the whole thing.”

“Clearly,” Raithe repeats with amusement.

“Oh, don’t even try to pretend he’s not our type,” Klaus rolls his eyes.

“I never said *that,*” Raithe demurs. He gives an appreciative glance at Dave’s arms. Klaus bares his teeth and hisses, because the only version of Klaus allowed to ogle Dave is *him.*

“Are you going to get into a catfight with *yourself?*” Five says. He doesn’t sound the least bit surprised, only resigned. Huh, looks like he does know Klaus pretty well.

“Maybe later,” Raithe grins. “For now, though, I think we should leave these two lovebirds alone. Mini-Me, you want to be untied?”

“...Yeah,” Klaus says, looking at Dave. Even though Dave still looks pretty confused, glancing between Klaus and Raithe, he returns the look with a smile. Klaus’ heart melts all over again. “Yeah, that’d be great, thanks. Don’t suppose you can do that solidifying trick on other ghosts, huh.” Because if he could, the whole family would know about Ben by now.

“No, I can,” Raithe says, and Klaus *whips* his head around so fast the floor heats up under his cheek. “Not at the moment, because I’m still recovering from escaping The Commission, but I should be able to in the next day or so. Or, well, actually….”

Raithe frowns, and steps forward to pull the ropes off him. Klaus stands, legs shaky. Going through withdrawal and not using your legs for a while makes a person all wobbly, who knew.

Dave steps closer to him, holding out a hand, and Klaus reaches out to meet it. Their hands hover in front of each other, just a whisper of air between them.

“Oh,” Five says.

They look over at him.

Five gives a small smile, and says, “Hey, Dave.”

He’s looking right at him.

Klaus looks back at Dave, who does the same, and before Klaus can think better of it he moves his hand forward and

they

touch.

Klaus sucks in a breath, and then -

Dave, *Dave,* he’s holding Dave and Dave is holding him and nothing else matters, nothing, and Klaus is crying because he never thought he’d have this again even if he got sober, even if he summoned Dave, even if they spent the rest of their life and unlife together, *never.* But he’s here, he’s holding Dave, and it’s the best thing Klaus has ever had and he can’t believe he was ever this lucky.

They stand there, holding each other, oblivious to anything else in the world, and everything is okay.

“Hey,” says a soft voice. Klaus doesn’t want to pay attention to anything else, so he ignores it, but it makes Dave shift. Reluctantly, Klaus looks up.

Raithe gives a small smile. “I have to let go now,” he says.

Klaus whines and squeezes Dave tighter. He feels Dave doing the same.

“Sorry,” Raithe says, apparently sincere. “I promise, I’ll be back to normal tomorrow.”

Slowly, reluctantly, Klaus and Dave separate. Raithe’s expression relaxes, and Klaus knows himself well enough to realize he’s tired.

Five apparently knows him well enough as well, because he steps up next to Raithe’s side and subtly tugs on Raithe’s arm. Raithe leans on him slightly.

“I’m actually going to have to leave the house tonight for a while,” Raithe says, glancing apologetically at Klaus. “I, uh. Don’t know when I’ll be back, exactly. Will you…..”

Klaus nearly asks why he’s telling him, before realization hits like a bucket of ice water. The ghosts. Raithe won’t be able to keep them away if he’s not in the Academy. Klaus feels his breath catch.

“Babe?” Dave says, worried.

Klaus blinks, and looks at Dave. His boyfriend. Not alive, no, but - here. Present.

He remembers how, back in ’Nam, being with Dave felt like a drug all it’s own. Like he was invincible, on top of the world, capable of anything. Like he was immortal, and maybe it was even a good thing.

“Yeah,” Klaus says, not tearing his eyes away from Dave. “Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

“Alright!” his older self says cheerily. “Well, we’ll just leave you to it, then. Five?”

Five nods, and they turn and walk out of the room.

Klaus looks at Dave. Dave looks at Klaus.

“Could you maybe explain the ‘other you’ thing again?” Dave asks.

Klaus can’t help but laugh.

“Sure,” he says. “Sure, of course.”

****

“Klaus,” Dave says solemnly, looking him in the eye. “I say this with the upmost love and respect, but your family is *weird as fuck.*”

“Oh no, I fully agree,” Klaus says. “Just thinking about dealing with them makes me want to shoot up again.”

Dave looks a little worried, which makes Klaus wave his hand (goodbye) in dismissal. “No no no, don’t worry, I’m sober now. Clean as a whistle. And I’m sure Diego will tie me up again if it looks like I’m going to slip. Maybe even if it doesn’t look like I’m going to slip.”

Now Dave looks indignant. “Excuse me, *I’m* the only person allowed to tie you up.”

“Awww!” Klaus all but melts, grinning at Dave so widely his cheeks hurt. “That’s so *sweet,* babe! Okay, you get exclusive bondage privileges from here on out. Unless we get a *really* good offer, anyways.” Klaus bats his eyelashes.

It takes a couple seconds for Dave to recover from that, but he smiles back. Not for the first time, Klaus thinks about how goddamned adorable it is that Dave can discuss sex so casually, but never fails to get distracted whenever Klaus does anything with his eyes. Honestly, they’re good eyes, nice color, he has no complaints, but really?

Now, Dave’s eyes, *those* are something to write home about.

“Deal,” Dave says.

Klaus giggles. He’s still feeling the all-over burn of withdrawal, but whenever he looks at Dave he can push it to the side. It’s still *there,* and *god* what Klaus would do for some of those pills he flushed away, but what he *wouldn’t* do is give up Dave, so that’s the way it’s going to be.

“So,” Dave says, looking around the room. “This is 2019? I gotta say, I’m disappointed. I expected flying cars and jetpacks by now, at least.”

“Oh, we keep those in the garage,” Klaus says, adopting a faux-snooty accent. It comes out as some weird mixture between Irish and French, but whatever. “They take up too much room otherwise, you see, our shrink ray is currently out of commission.”

“Of course,” Dave nods solemnly. “You have an older model, then?”

“What can I say,” Klaus sighs, leaning back against the wall. “We’re very poor, you see. Just scraping by. There’s only five kitchens in the entire place.”

“Looks like I’ll have to love you for your sparkling personality, then,” Dave smiles.

Klaus’ breath catches in his throat.

He didn’t….he didn’t know if he’d ever hear that again. It’s just as much a punch in the gut as the first time, back in ’Nam, that mix of disbelief and confusion and *need*. Almost unconsciously, Klaus finds himself staring at Dave’s face, searching for the slightest hint that he doesn’t mean it, that it’s all a big joke with Klaus as the punchline.

There isn’t any, of course. There’s a dancing humor in Dave’s eyes, but it’s not malicious, not laughing *at Klaus.* And even if the words are said lightly (how can he say them lightly and still mean every one? Klaus has never managed both at the same time) there’s no bite to them.

“Hey,” Dave says. He leans forward, and his eyes soften. “I do love you. Not because of what you have or anything, but because you’re - *you.*”

“Well, there’s one more me running around than usual, so you might have to be a little more specific on that one going forward,” Klaus jokes, trying to discreetly wipe at his eyes.

“I will be very careful that you’re the only instance of you I tie up,” Dave says innocently.

Klaus giggles, a little wetly. He looks at Dave. “I love you too, you know.”

“Yeah,” Dave says, smiling like he’s the luckiest man on Earth (untrue, that would be Klaus). “I know.”

****

“This was a mistake,” Klaus says, face buried in his hands. “A horrible, horrible mistake.”

“- and *then,*” Ben continues, paying no attention to Klaus’ despair, “the jackass challenges Klaus to a contest in who can get more people to buy them drinks, which Klaus then proceeds to win - not by charming people, no, but by *getting on top of the table and dancing the can-can* until people bought him drinks to get him to stop.”

“Wow,” Dave says, looking utterly delighted.

“Hey!” Klaus jabs a finger at Ben. “Wait, no, I won fair and square, they loved my dancing!”

“They were taking bets on how many shots it took before you fell and broke your neck,” Ben says flatly.

“...Oh,” Klaus says. He strains to remember. “It was somewhere around seventeen, right?”

“Give or take a dozen,” Ben mutters to Dave. “It was actually kind of impressive.”

“You should’ve seen him in Saigon,” Dave grins at Klaus. “I was really very impressed with his dancing. Much better than mine.”

“Dave, sweetheart,” Klaus says. “That’s not saying much. An electrocuted weasel is a better dancer than you.”

Dave does an *adorable* mock-pout, Klaus decides. He knew this already, but it bears repeating.

Klaus only grins and rocks back on his chair. They’re in the parlor now, the first rays of dawn just starting to peek over the horizon. He and Dave spent most of the night catching up, whereupon Klaus had the phenomenally stupid idea of introducing Dave to Ben. He really should have thought this through.

Raithe left hours ago. Klaus knows this by the fact that there are half a dozen ghosts milling around the parlor. They haven’t come near him, though. Ben always tried, whenever Klaus was teetering on the verge of sobriety, to keep the more aggressive ghosts away, but he was never very good at it. Sarcasm and assholery are two things Ben learned after dying, but he still fucking hates violent confrontation. Klaus doesn’t blame him for that, considering what he was forced to do with his powers their whole childhood, but it kind of sucks for his usefulness in keeping the ghosts away.

Dave, however, was a soldier. He’s totally comfortable with violence, and has no problem physically enforcing a boundary line between Klaus and any other ghosts.

Klaus is roughly ten times more in love with his boyfriend than he was yesterday. He swears to himself that once he’s learned to make Dave corporeal himself, they are going to have *so much sex.* Days of it. At least.

“So, Klaus,” Dave says, and Klaus briefly basks in the sound of his name said by Dave’s voice. “Now that I’ve met two and a half of your siblings, when can I meet the rest?”

“Um,” Klaus says.

“You might want to hold off on that,” Ben advises dryly. “As in, forever.”

“Yes, that,” Klaus says, pointing at Ben. Ben is always right, it gets annoying sometimes but in this case Klaus will take all the support he can get.

“....Why?” Dave says. “I mean, I know you don’t exactly get along with them, you said, but - you said they were okay with you liking men, right? And - you’re family.”

"*Actually,* we're all adopted, so…." Klaus trails off, before sighing and biting his lip. "Look, Dave, they won't really - uh, they wouldn't exactly, you know…."

"They wouldn't take him seriously," Ben says bluntly. "They never have. They'll think he's either high or lying or - whatever. They won't believe him until you become corporeal in front of them. I can't wait for that, either."

"Yeah," Klaus says. "That."

Dave frowns, and hesitates. "Well….didn't you think that about Five?"

Klaus and Ben both blink.

There's silence for a long moment.

"....Yeah," Klaus says at last. "I did. But that was kind of special circumstances, it's not like I knew he'd spent two decades with a much more competent version of me."

"I recall you being plenty competent at a lot of things," Dave says mildly.

Klaus waves it away. "Anyways, what I was trying to say is that none of my remaining siblings are really inclined to believe you exist. Luther wouldn't care, Diego would get all sarcastic, and I think Allison would just try to get me into rehab again."

"What about Vanya?" Ben says suddenly.

"Vanya," Dave repeats, glancing between Ben and Klaus. "The one that plays violin?"

"Yeah," Klaus mumbles. "Her." He clears his throat. "I, uh, I don't think she'd be too happy to see me, period. And she's on that romantic getaway, anyways. It would be very rude to interrupt."

"Since when has *that* stopped you?" Ben says incredulously, which, rude. Klaus is *excellent* with boundaries, thank you very much. "And hold on, why wouldn't she want to see you? You just said she was a little upset."

"Well, yeah," Klaus says vaguely, trying to wriggle his way out of Ben's *Look.* Fuck, but that should not be as terrifying as it is. "I mean, there was that whole Raithe thing, and suddenly her closest friend as a kid is completely ignoring her for someone who looks just like me? That's upsetting! I wouldn't want to see me either, if I was her. Plus the whole finding out about mom thing…."

Ben blinks. "*Finding out?* What do you mean?"

"What about your mom?" Dave says, frowning.

Klaus swallows and looks away. "I - uh, I told you how our Mom's a robot," he says to Dave. "Turns out that when Pinky and Blue kidnapped me, they - uh, they turned her off. Permanently. And - I thought Vanya knew about that, because she was *here* during the attack,

or at least I thought so, but turns out she….didn't. So when she came over for Five's intervention, she saw -"

"Oh god," Ben breathes.

"Yeah," Klaus lets out a short, humorless laugh. He reaches up to rub his cheek. "She can slap pretty hard for someone so small," he informs them. "And she had quite the tirade. I couldn't even get a word in edgewise."

"Wait," Ben says, straightening, eyes wide. "So - wait, does she still think you deliberately didn't tell her?"

"I guess," Klaus shrugs uncomfortably.

"But you had no idea," Dave says. "You were in Vietnam!"

"Klaus, you need to tell her," Ben says firmly, which, what.

"What." Klaus says.

"He's right," Dave nods. "She deserves to know."

"What - why?" Klaus says, bewildered. "So I didn't know - everyone else did! *They* didn't tell her! How would telling her about Vietnam help anything?"

"Because the *reason* they didn't tell her is because they were *looking for you.*" Ben says, with dawning realization in his voice. "And if they didn't even know you were missing until Five came back - Klaus, I don't even think she knows you got kidnapped. You need to *tell her.*"

"I -" Klaus says, looking between Dave and Ben. "What, *now?*"

"Yes, now!" Ben says, springing from his chair and starting to pace. "They didn't say the exact address, but I know the general area, we should be able to find it by late afternoon, early evening. Dave will have to tell you how to drive, we can steal Diego's car -"

"Whoa whoah whoa whoa!" Klaus says, waving his hands. "This sounds like a lot of stress for a *very* recently sober me, so maybe we could postpone it for a few days….?"

Ben gives him another *Look.* Klaus juts his chin out. He is not going to be intimidated, damn it!

"Klaus," Dave says.

Oh no. Dave's voice is soft, and quiet, and Klaus just know that if he were corporeal he'd be taking Klaus' hand in his own. Against his better judgement, Klaus looks at Dave, and almost winces at the gentle look on his boyfriend's face.

"Klaus," Dave says again. "She deserves to know the truth about why she wasn't told. And - I really would like to meet her."

Dave and Klaus stare at each other for several seconds, frozen.

Then Klaus *flumps* back into his chair and groans, long and loud.

“Fine,” he says. “Okay, fine. Road trip, everybody. Yaay.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh yeah.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They have breakfast at Griddy's.

Well, Five has breakfast. Klaus watches his brother eat waffles and sadly considers the downsides of being a ghost.

"For fucks' sake," Five says, rolling his eyes. "They're not even that good."

Klaus stares at a glob of syrup that sloooowly drips off Five's fork. "Blasphemy," he says. "Do not dare besmirch the great waffle gods. Their wrath is mighty and horrific. And sticky."

"Oh no," Five says in a monotone, cutting off another piece of waffle. "How will I ever survive."

"I can't protect you forever, Five," Klaus says solemnly. "And I wouldn't fight the waffle gods anyways. They might let me eat them again, in return for handing you over."

"Far be it from me to stand in the way of you being able to eat waffles again," Five says. He sighs, eyes his plate, and finishes off the last of the waffles, making sure to sop up every possible bit of syrup. Klaus approves, even if Five is doing it because of apocalyptic instincts to eat every bit of food put in front of you.

The waitress keeps sending concerned glances at Five. At first Klaus thought it was due to his arm, but on second inspection it looks more like she *recognizes* him. Klaus frowns at her, then at Five.

Who oh-so-casually turns his head away slightly, hiding his eyes from Klaus.

Very, very calmly, Klaus props his elbows on the tabletop and buries his face in his hands.

"Five," he says, with a really very extraordinary amount of patience. "What did you do."

"I came to this place to get coffee, the first day I came back," Five says nonchalantly. "I suppose she must recognize me. The arm is a little distinctive."

"Uh huh," Klaus says. "and what happened after you got coffee?"

There is a *gloriously* awkward pause.

Klaus looks up from his hands. "Five."

"I might have forgotten about my tracker," Five says, and his disaffected tone might fool anyone who didn't notice he still isn't looking Klaus in the eye. "So there was a bit of

trouble. But she didn't see anything, and most of the guys ended up getting knifed anyways. As far as she knows, I left before anything happened."

"Knifed - wait, Diego was here too? Is he on the hook for this? There aren't many stab-happy vigilantes running around this town." Klaus pauses. "At least, I hope not."

Five waves away his (perfectly valid) concern. "It's all sorted, Diego has a - police friend, or something."

"....If you say so," Klaus says dubiously, still keeping half an eye on the waitress. She notices his look and steps back a little, face growing paler.

Well, he doesn't want to *scare* her, and she's definitely a civilian, so he turns his attention back to Five and lets his face grow serious.

"So," Klaus says. "We're three down. Three to go. Next name?"

"Frederick Pryor," Five says, taking out the list inside his jacket and smoothing it out. He taps the fourth name, and Klaus leans over to note the spelling. "Thirty-six years old, works in insurance." Five glances at Klaus. "Single father of two."

Klaus takes a deep breath. Holds it. Lets it out, slowly.

"Okay," he says. "Suggested approach?"

"Hard to say," Five says. "He'll be at work by now, so it all depends on the layout there….I can do it this time."

Klaus nods, eyes fixed on the paper. "Thank you."

Naturally, the first three targets were all asleep when they were found. The perils of working at nighttime. In order to complete the job and not raise suspicion at the same time, it was imperative that no one realize the deaths weren't natural. It was kind of *suspicious* that three unrelated people died of heart failure on the same night when they had no history of such, but what other explanation was there?

After all, it's not like someone could just reach into a person's chest and make things *stop*.

"Hey," Five says. He reaches out to take Klaus' hand. Klaus almost pulls away (he shouldn't be touching Five with that hand, what if he -) but Five has a very strong grip for someone with the body of a teenager. "Hey, it's -" he falters a bit, because they promised not to lie to each other and things are pretty obviously not okay.

"I'm sorry," Five settles on saying.

"I know," Klaus says. He takes another breath he doesn't need, and lets it out. He squeezes Five's hand. "I know."

It's no use saying it's not Five's fault. He wouldn't believe it. But as soon as this whole shitshow is over and done with, Klaus plans to hammer Five over the head with that fact until

he accepts it.

Klaus slides out of the booth. He lays down a few bills he 'liberated' from someone before coming here, making sure to leave a nice tip for the waitress as an apology for Five's behavior a few nights ago. Then, still holding Five's hand, they leave the diner.

"What's the company Pryor is at?" Klaus asks.

"Jet-Net Insurance," Five says. "Over on thirtieth -"

Then he stops talking.

And Klaus mutters under his breath, "Shit."

The police car comes to a stop right in front of Griddy's. The detective inside zeroes in on them immediately. Well, probably not here for donuts.

"As far as she knows, I left before anything happened," Klaus mimics under his breath, shooting his brother a glance. *"As far as she knows."*

"Shut up or I'll yell child abuse," Five says, smiling at the cop. Well, more like grimacing. Right, *that's* going to convince people he's innocent.

The cop gets out of the car and saunters over to them, putting her hands in her pockets. She has darkish skin, a shade or two lighter than Allison, and carries herself with the same effortless grace. Klaus is impressed. That takes years to get down right when you have a physical body to deal with.

"Hey there," the woman says, tilting her head a little. Her eyes flicker between Klaus and Five. "I'm Detective Patch, could I have a moment of your time?"

"Uh," Klaus says, glancing at Five. "We were kind of in a hurry…."

"But we'd be happy to *cooperate,* Detective," Five says firmly, still sporting that unsettling grin. It looks like it belongs on a pumpkin. Klaus sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Great," Detective Patch says, glancing at Klaus again. And oh, hey, wait, Klaus knows that look. That's *suspicion.* Why the fuck is *he* getting a suspicious look? "Ah, were you two aware of the shootout that happened at this location a few days ago? On the 24th?"

"Why, *Detective,*" Klaus says, puffing up and putting on his best 'offended moral guardian' voice. He has way more experience *hearing* that voice than *using* it, but needs must. "My brother is *thirteen years old,* and you want to discuss a *shootout* in front of him?"

"So he's your brother?" Detective Patch says, looking at Five. Then she - bends down slightly to get to his eye level holy shit that's *hilarious.* Five looks like he'd dearly like to stab her, his horrible grin growing even stiffer. "Hey, what's your name?"

"Klaus," Klaus blurts out without thinking.

Detective Patch blinks at him. “What?”

“His name,” Klaus says. “It’s Klaus. German, you know. Our mother emmigrated.”

Five is staring at him with a very familiar expression. It’s the ‘what-the-fuck-are-you-doing-shut-the-fuck-up-right-fucking-now-you-FUCKING-IDIOT’ expression. It’s pretty much the same as his ‘I-am-going-to-gut-you-like-a-fish-you-FUCKING-IDIOT’ expression. Also his just plain ‘you-are-a-FUCKING-IDIOT’ expression. He’s really pulling off a triple bonus there.

“...Uh huh,” Detective Patch says, looking between them. “But I don’t think I was addressing you. I asked *him* what his name was. Kiddo?”

Five pulls his grin even tighter. Klaus is going to have *nightmares,* goddamnit, and he doesn’t even sleep!

“Like my brother said,” Five says woodenly. “My name is Klaus.”

Sadly, Detective Patch does not have the brains of a concussed lemming, so it isn’t a surprise when she doesn’t buy it. She looks between them again, and says to Klaus, “Sir, could you step away from your brother for a moment?”

Her hand strays closer to her hip, where her holster rests. It’s not a question.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Five says, dropping the Hellface like a hot potato, “We don’t have time for this, meet me at the place ASAP.”

Then he fucking *teleports away.*

Klaus looks at the empty space where his brother used to be. Then at Detective Patch’s slack-jawed face.

“Kids these days,” he says. “You can never keep up.”

Then he drops out of visibility.

He stays around for a minute or two to witness the *glorious* shriek of “What the *FUCK!*” echo through the neighborhood. God, he hardly ever got to do this when he was working a job, it was always too “conspicuous” or “confusing” or “liable to get us mistaken for gods, no that is not a good thing Klaus”. And Five deserves to wait around for a while, the little asshole.

And then it turns out that waiting around was the right decision, because after whirling around for several seconds in shock, Detective Patch jolts like she’s been hit by lightning. She races back to her car and punches in a number on her phone.

“Diego,” she says, and Klaus nearly falls over. “You wouldn’t happen to know a couple of teleporters by any chance, would you?”

****

Five is pretending (badly) to be cool and collected when Klaus finally shows up at Jet-Net Insurance parking lot. The moment he materializes, that cover is thrown out the window as Five teleports to him. Klaus instantly gets a miniature version of his brother wrapped around his middle.

He hugs back just as hard, because - yeah, they might still be a little too traumatized to be apart for that long.

“Where *were* you,” Five says, probably aiming for ‘disgruntled’ but instead landing somewhere in the general proximity of ‘shaken’. “You should have been here at least fifteen minutes ago, it’s not that far.”

“Sorry,” Klaus mumbles. “Took the scenic route. By which I mean that lady cop is Diego’s friend, and she figured he might know something about the *teleporting teenager*.”

“Oh, don’t even pretend like you didn’t disappear right after me,” Five says. Then, “Shit. Did he tell her?”

“Ayup,” Klaus nods. “Well, the abridged version. Very, very abridged. I think she’s going to taser him when she learns the whole thing, she seems the type. *But* it did get some things cleared up, and you are no longer assumed missing! Yay!”

“I’m what,” Five says blankly.

“Well,” Klaus says. “Apparently Hazel and Cha-Cha posed as PIs looking for a missing kid in order to find you. They interrogated the waitress, so she thought I’d, like, abducted you when we showed up at the diner? So she called the cops. And the lovely Detective Patch was actually on the diner massacre thing, so she knew you’d been on the scene, except there was something about a dead guy? I don’t know, it’s all a bit confusing. But your performance back there was *not* indicative of someone who hasn’t been kidnapped by a psychotic murderer, bro, I have to say.”

“Well,” Five huffs out a laugh. “I *was* technically kidnapped, I didn’t want to get breakfast at all. And all things being fair, you *are* a murderer with - questionable mental stability.”

Klaus sniffs. “See if I get you waffles again anytime soon.”

“Fine with me, I still prefer eggs,” Five says, because he is a heathen. Klaus looks to the heavens for the patience to deal with his brother’s goddamned bullshit.

“I have no idea why I even put up with you,” Klaus informs him.

“Funny,” Five says, “Because I was about to say the same thing. By the way, do you happen to have a ballpark on how many more Klauses we’re going to accumulate in the next week or so? I’m asking because at our current acquisition rate, the entire city is going to be populated with them within the year, and to be perfectly honest I’m not sure that’s a city I want to save.”

“Har de har har,” Klaus says. “We’ve got a regular comedian here, folks.”

“I figure since you have a corner on the death jokes, I can have everything else,” Five agrees solemnly. Klaus snorts.

They remain in the same position for the next few minutes or so, until Five’s heartrate returns to its resting pace. Klaus runs a hand through Five’s hair, the repetitive motion familiar as his own name. The parking lot is relatively deserted, but Klaus notices a few people slowing down by then, staring with confused and sometimes concerned glances.

Klaus almost rolls his eyes and shouts ‘It’s 2019 already, get with the program!’ before he chokes it down with the realization that *oh god Five looks like a kid now.*

“Oh fuck,” Klaus says, and detaches himself from Five.

His brother looks up at him in alarm. “Klaus? What’s wrong?”

“Uh, nothing, nothing,” Klaus says, ushering Five inside the building. There’s a moderately spacious lobby, and Klaus steers them to the chairs furthest from the receptionist.

“Bullshit,” Five says immediately. “What’s wrong? Hostiles?”

“What? No, no, nothing like that,” Klaus says, peering nervously out the window. Thankfully, no one decided to make such an issue of it that they’d follow them inside. “Just some unexpected consequences. Or really, this should have been pretty obvious, I can’t believe we didn’t think of how it would look -”

“What?” Five says.

Klaus blinks, and looks him in the eye. “Five,” he says seriously. “You know very fucking well what people think when we’re all cuddly and shit. But now you look like a *kid.*”

Five stares at him for a very, very long moment.

Very slowly, he closes his eyes, and takes a deep breath. Lets it out.

“I have an approach to Pryor mapped out,” he says, in an impressively steady voice.

“Do tell,” Klaus says. *“Please.”*

****

Five *is* the one who kills Pryor, in the end.

It’s quick and easy. Hardly a challenge at all. Five jumps into the staff kitchen when Pryor is heating up a late breakfast, hits him over the head at a certain angle, and stages the scene to make it look like he tripped and hit his head on a counter. No camera in the room means no one would ever suspect differently.

Waiting outside, staring up at the sky, Klaus muses that it honestly feels…just like another job.

It was inevitable, really. He's spent years killing people. Innocent people. Sure, Five pulled the (metaphorical) trigger most of the time, but Klaus is by no means inexperienced. Not counting Commission Headquarters, he has dozens of kills to his name.

At first it was a reflex to avoid a sticky situation. Then it was a job that required Five to be in a different location while the target died. Then a few more sticky situations, a few more complicated jobs, and somewhere along the line….

Klaus wonders, vaguely, if The Commission deliberately pushed him into becoming a killer. Manipulated their jobs until he had to kill people on the regular. He's not sure why they'd want to do that, but they never did make much sense to him. Maybe they just wanted to see if they could?

Well. If that really is what happened, it backfired pretty damn thoroughly. Not counting Commission Headquarters, he's a hardened killer.

Counting Commission Headquarters….

He looks down at his hand. Closes it. Opens it.

(goodbye)

(goodbye)

(goodbye)

There's a flash of blue light next to him, and Five straightens that ridiculous tie of his. There's a few spots of blood on his hand.

"It's done," he says shortly.

"Alright, then," Klaus says, closing his hand (goodbye). "Who's next?"

Chapter End Notes

AKA 'the chapter where I see how many necks I can break from emotional whiplash alone'

Chapter 33

Five leans down to check Rachel Hassan's pulse. Fingers to the throat, wait.

No pulse. Of course, he could have determined that already, considering the angle her neck is at, but it's just sloppy not to check. Five pulls his hand away, and uses his sleeve to wipe where his fingers rested a moment ago. No sense in leaving any more evidence than he has to.

With a small sigh, Five glances around the basement. Hassan lays at the bottom of the steps, having tripped over a loose nail near the top. At least, that's what it looks like. There's already a small puddle of blood gathering underneath her head.

"Rachel? Honey?"

That would be the husband, then. Five jumps out of the basement before the voice comes any closer. He has no desire to stick around and hear the man discover his wife's body.

Landing a block away, Five glances over at Klaus. His brother is standing with his hands in his pockets, staring up at the sky.

"Done," Five says, adjusting his jacket slightly.

Klaus nods, absently. "Alright."

Without prompting, Klaus steps forward and hugs Five. Five hugs back tightly, feeling his breathing become less forced.

"That's all of them," Klaus says quietly. It's not phrased like a question, but Five knows what he's really asking. *Is it over? Can we stop now?*

"Yeah," Five says. "Yeah, that's all of them."

"Okay," Klaus says. "Okay."

Five feels a lump in his throat. An *I'm sorry* bubbles to the tip of his tongue, but he swallows it back down. He's already said it so many times it's all but empty air at this point.

"I love you," he says instead, helplessly, and reflects how that isn't actually all that much better.

"Love you too, Five," Klaus says, though, and god, why does he? All Five has ever done is hurt him.

Klaus sways a little, and Five closes his eyes. He's reminded of when he actually was thirteen, and Klaus insisted on a 'daily hug dose', using up the precious time he could stay corporeal in order to give Five comfort. Five always wriggled and cursed, but secretly - secretly he wanted the hugs to last longer. He'd always disdained physical contact as a child,

but until he'd gone six months without any other people at all, he hadn't realized *exactly* how essential it was.

He thought it was stupid. He thought, when Klaus began his little campaign, that being comforted by physical contact was ridiculous of him. That it made him childish, pathetic, soft. He didn't allow himself to express any enjoyment, didn't stop trying to get away, and certainly didn't *return* the hugs.

He was a fucking idiot as a teenager.

Eventually, Klaus disentangles from the hug. He looks down at Five, and pulls up a smile. It's small, but genuine, and something in Five's chest loosens at the sight.

"Come on," Klaus says, glancing around. "I need some stress relief after this."

Five raises an eyebrow. "Oh? Where are we going?"

****

Klaus spreads his arms out wide, dancing back on his feet, grinning like a loon. "Behold!"

"Uh," Five says, looking around in bemusement.

They're in the warehouse district.

Granted, Five only knows this because there are rows and rows of warehouses around them, stretching out for at least a mile or so. He's never been here himself. In fact, this is the only part of the city he didn't bother to explore in the apocalypse, because he wasn't going to find a grocery store *here.* Klaus brought back a few things on occasion, but most of the crates contain lumber, iron, and other raw materials rather than anything useful for survival.

There isn't much activity going on. There's the odd forklift, and a couple security guards, but otherwise they're the only people in sight.

The sun beats down, high in the sky. It's late afternoon, and the temperatures haven't really been sweltering but they haven't been quite comfortable either. There's a few clouds, here and there, but nothing that blocks the sun for more than a moment. Five squints as he looks around.

"Why are we here," he eventually caves and asks.

"Now *that,*" Klaus says, raising a finger. "Is an excellent question, *mon frere.* It could be asked of anyone, really, but it's especially pertinent in our case. I must assume that the old man in the sky decided to try that whole Jesus thing again, but he got a bit too enthusiastic and produced a few dozen rather than just one. I don't blame him, of course, two thousand years without doin' it has *got* to wear on a guy -"

"Klaus," Five says with exasperation. It's a bit ruined by how he can't quite stop the corners of his mouth from turning upwards.

“What, you *asked,*” Klaus says, grinning.

Five rolls his eyes and gestures to their surroundings. “Why are we *in the warehouse district,*” he says dryly.

“Oh, that!” Klaus says, looking around like it’s the first time he’s noticing the buildings around them. “Well, Fivey dear, we’re here because it’s the most deserted place in the city I can think of.”

“....And that’s important *because*....” Five says leadingly.

“Why,” Klaus says. He tilts his head, grinning. “Because we’re playing Ghost Tag, of course.”

Five straightens, and looks at their surroundings with new eyes.

It *is* a good ground for it, he realizes. The buildings are laid out in neat rows, with plenty of open spaces in between, but they block eyelines like there’s no tomorrow. He’s not sure what the insides of the warehouses are like, but he’s betting on ‘cluttered’. And probably ‘dark’. The entire area is large enough that is would take him several jumps to cross the whole thing. And of course….

“There can be a penalty if someone sees us,” Five says, looking back at Klaus.

Klaus beams and claps his hands. “Exactly! I was thinking that if we get spotted, I can’t go invisible and you can’t teleport, we have to get away from them entirely without powers.”

“They’ll think we’re intruders, though,” Five points out.

“Not if we’re smart,” Klaus argues. “Just be casual about it. Deflect suspicion, walk slowly, do some fast talk, that sort of thing.”

“I can’t help but notice that’s more your skillset than mine,” Five observes dryly.

“Huh, really?” Klaus puts his hands in his pockets innocently. “Hadn’t noticed.”

“How about this,” Five says. “If we’re spotted, we have to get away immediately. They’ll probably dismiss it as a hallucination or trick of the light. But *then* I can’t jump and you can’t go invisible for five minutes afterwards.”

“Oooo,” Klaus says. “Okay, yeah, I like that.”

“Great,” Five nods.

Then, before Klaus can react, he *jumps* and smacks his brother’s arm.

“Tag!” he says brightly, before jumping away.

He lands on top of a warehouse roof, sloped away from where Klaus last stood. It occurs to Five that the presence of actual roofs is greatly to his advantage. Klaus never figured out how

to float for some reason (to his annoyance and Five's confusion, because he *still* has no idea why), so he'll have to get up to the roof the long way.

Which, of course, doesn't preclude bursting up from beneath Five's feet. Five makes sure he doesn't stay too long in one spot. He eyeballs a bit of open area a few warehouses over and jumps to it.

Upon hearing a sudden *clang* from behind him, Five whirls around to see -

- a worker, staring at him in shock, the tines of his forklift showing a bit of scraped paint from where they smacked into a container.

Fuck. Five jumps onto another roof.

….Which he's stuck on for the next five minutes. Well, that was probably inevitable, considering four jumps in a row seems to be his limit right now, but still. Five frowns to himself, moderating his breathing.

"Well," he mutters to himself. "This might be more of a challenge than I thought."

That - tugs on something, inside his mind.

Something kindles to life inside his chest, and it takes a moment for him to recognize it. It's something he's felt many times in his life, of varying intensities, with varying accompanied emotions. And while he hasn't been able to enjoy it to its fullest extent these past four and a half years, he still remembers.

It's excitement. It's anticipation. It's the sheer, overwhelming *rush* he gets whenever there's a problem, a challenge, a puzzle set in front of him for him to solve. He has to rely on his wits and his powers absolutely, just him against the world. He has to find the exact right strategy in order to come out on top, and he can't slip up.

And this time - this time there aren't any lives on the line. Nothing bad will happen as a result of him succeeding or failing. The only thing at stake is how long he can remain not-It.

Five feels a smile creeping over his face. He looks up at the sky.

"You idiot," he murmurs. "You stupid fucking idiot."

Naturally, Klaus doesn't reply.

Five takes a deep breath, and swipes at his eyes. He laughs a little.

"Of course," he says. "I'm not going to go easy on you."

There's no answer to that, either, but Five knows very well that if Klaus could hear it he'd raise an eyebrow and say *'well, I certainly hope not.'*

So of course, Five endeavors to not disappoint.

****

“I hate you,” Five says, flopped on his back and staring up at the sky. “I *fucking hate you.*”

“Quite the turnaround from earlier there, Benjamin Button.” Klaus says. He sits down next to Five’s head and brushes a few sweat-soaked locks out of his face.

Five squints at him. “Benjamin Button?”

“Backwards aging guy, it’s really a miracle I didn’t use that one before,” Klaus informs him. “But to get back on subject, I don’t really see why you would hate me. After all, it’s not like *I* made you overstretch yourself.”

Flipping the bird is moderately exhausting, but Five considers the cost worth it. Klaus snickers.

“I,” Five announces, “am not going to move for the next day or so. If the world ends, at least I’ll be put out of my misery.”

“Aww,” Klaus coos, patting his cheek. Five grunts when he moves it away, because it’s *cool* and he feels way too warm right now. Klaus replaces his hand on Five’s forehead, and Five sighs in relief. “That’s the spirit, Five! We’ll make an optimist of you yet!”

“Shut up,” Five mutters, too tired to come up with a more biting rejoinder.

“You did win, though,” Klaus comments. “I tagged you a bit more, but you always tagged me back pretty damned quick.”

“I could have played for longer,” Five grumbles, ignoring the fact that his body is informing him that no, he really couldn’t have.

Klaus nods with perfect equanimity. “Of course, of course,” he says. “If you wanted to open your wounds, that is. But you know me, always proposing that crazy ‘moderation’ thing.”

Five looks at him. “If I ever want to convince our siblings that you aren’t really Klaus, for some reason,” he decides, “I’m going to tell them that you do, in fact, propose moderation in a wide variety of things. I suspect it will probably convince even your younger self.”

“Oh, without a doubt,” Klaus agrees. “No question.”

Sighing, Five closes his eyes.

He *did* overdo it on the teleporting, he has to admit. Normally, what he did would be his regular threshold, but his bullet wounds (and cracked wrist, and dampened hearing) lower that threshold significantly. He feels like one more jump would cause him to collapse in a heap, and might actually just not be possible at all.

“You okay?” Klaus says. “Dehydrated?”

Five considers, then gives a nod.

“Alrighty, then,” Klaus says. “I think there’s a park a few blocks from here with a water fountain.”

Five groans. Then considers for a moment, before lifting up his arm in a silent demand.

“Oh, *I* see,” Klaus says with amusement. “You just want a piggyback ride.”

“It’s the only way I’m going anywhere,” Five says honestly. He lifts his arm higher, before letting it flop back down onto his chest.

Klaus giggles, which is entirely uncalled-for and earns him a glare from Five. Then he bends over and easily picks Five up. It takes some wrangling to get into a position that allows Five to stay limp, but eventually they set off.

The park does indeed have a water fountain, and Five didn’t realize just how thirsty he was until he’s gulping down water so fast Klaus has to pull him back before he accidentally chokes. After that, he takes his time drinking, automatically trying to ensure that none of the water gets wasted.

It still amazes him, quite often, just how abundant these things are in a pre-apocalyptic world. He could keep pressing this button for hours, days even, and it would keep dispensing water the entire time. It’s perfectly drinkable, and would take some doing to render it *not.* It’s set out in the middle of a public space, where anyone can come along and take however much they want whenever they like. And none of them - not one - considers this to be extraordinary in any way.

Five only somewhat remembers what that was like, having instant, unthinking access to water and food and the like without any consideration for their origins or scarcity. It’s like a dream more than a memory, something he read in a story a long time ago. A fairytale.

But the fountain is still dispensing water, and it doesn’t stop until he lifts his finger from the button.

He sighs, and sways on his feet.

“Okay,” Klaus says, scooping him up again. Five wonders vaguely if his smaller size makes Klaus want to do that more. “We should probably head back to the Academy.”

Five squints up at the sky. It’s still an few hours before it gets dark, so yeah. They’ve been gone for over eighteen hours, everyone is probably wondering where the fuck they are. He hums in agreement.

Klaus sets off at a steady pace. “I liked playing Ghost Tag,” he says, and there’s something lurking under his words. A weight to them that such a simple sentiment wouldn’t normally hold. “We should do it again.”

“If the world doesn’t end,” Five mutters sleepily. He yawns.

“If the world doesn’t end,” Klaus agrees. He squeezes Five’s hand. “Go to sleep, bro. You hardly got any last night.”

Five mumbles something even he isn't sure of the content, and closes his eyes. The drive that's possessed him for the last week fades away like the morning fog.

They've done all they can. Either the world ends, or it doesn't. There's nothing else they can do about it. Anything that happens from here on out is entirely out of their control.

There's something….not quite comforting, but almost *freeing* about that.

Five rests his head on Klaus' shoulder, and drifts off to sleep.

Chapter 34

“I blame you for this,” Klaus tells Ben. “It’s entirely your fault.”

Ben sends him an incredulous look. “How is a traffic jam my fault?”

“Because if you hadn’t been a goody-two-shoes, *I* would be back home instead of sitting here bored out of my skull. You know, I bet Raithe is back from wherever he went. I could be making out with Dave right now.”

“As appealing as that sounds,” Dave interjects, smiling fondly at Klaus, “I still stand by the decision to come here.”

“See?” Ben points. “Why aren’t you blaming him?”

“Because he is perfect and can do no wrong,” Klaus says promptly. “You, on the other hand, are just an asshole.”

“I think I recall you complaining about a few of my habits back in ’Nam,” Dave says.

Klaus reaches over and mimes patting Dave’s cheek. “Sweetie,” he says seriously, “The fact that you don’t like waffles isn’t your fault. I’m pretty sure it qualifies you for a mental disorder of some kind, but I promise you, it’s not your fault. We can look into therapists once this whole apocalypse business is taken care of.”

There’s a poorly-repressed snort of laughter from Dave, but Klaus is entirely serious. He can only imagine that there’s some traumatic, waffle-related incident buried in Dave’s subconscious that prevents him from enjoying them, and as his boyfriend it is Klaus’ duty to help him overcome it. Finding a therapist who takes on dead people is going to be tricky, but they’ll make do.

“What’s even going on,” Ben mutters, peering out the window from the backseat. “At this rate we won’t get to Jackpine Road for hours.”

Groaning, Klaus flops back against his seat. “Hours? *Beeeeen*…..”

“Why don’t we get out and see what’s causing the holdup?” Dave suggests.

“If it stops Klaus from whining, I’m all for it,” Ben says immediately, and phases through the car door.

Klaus huffs, and flips the bird at his brother’s back. He gets out of the car (which he can drive perfectly well, regardless of Ben’s frequently muttered fervent thanks that he’s already dead), and starts walking along the road.

It takes a few minutes before he reaches the disturbance. At least, he’s pretty sure it’s the disturbance. There’s a whole lot of police cars for it to be anything else. Klaus eyes them

warily. He and the police do not have the most cordial of relationships.

The area cordoned off is a little diner-type location. It barely looks big enough to hold a dozen people. There's evidence markers strewn around, and police officers milling about. No other cars in the parking lot.

"....Does this look like a murder scene to you?" Ben says, looking around with a frown.

"Why yes, yes it does," Klaus says, snapping his fingers. "You know how I know? It's the subtle little clues, like the style of police tape, and the number of officers, and - oh, that guy." He points.

Dave and Ben follow his finger to where he's pointing.

Granted, the ghost doesn't look dead at first glance. But he's loitering around in plainclothes when all the other people behind the tape are police, obviously out of place, and he has the *look.* Grief-fury-helplessness-despair is a very familiar look on the newer ghosts - well, on any of them, really, but it's particularly fresh in this case, Klaus can tell.

There's also the fact that he's staring at the blood-splattered wall of the diner, and when he moves his head slightly there's an obvious wetness in his hair.

"Ah," Dave says.

"Yep," Klaus says, popping the 'p'. "So, mystery solved." He spins on his heel, flinging his arms wide to keep his balance. "Ugh, you're right, we probably won't find Vanya for *hours* -"

And then he stops.

"Probably," Ben says. "But I don't recommend going back to the Academy, you *did* steal Diego's car…."

"Klaus?" Dave asks.

Klaus starts walking.

"Klaus," Ben says.

He should probably answer them. They sound a little concerned.

Instead, he reaches up, and

pulls

down

the

striped

scarf.

It's a very pretty scarf. Knitted, black and cream. Nice and soft. Probably very warm. He rubs a thumb over the material.

"Klaus?" Dave says, concerned. "What's wrong?"

"....This is Vanya's scarf." Klaus says quietly.

There is absolute silence.

"Oh, god," Ben says, voice thick. He looks over at the scene with wide eyes.

Abruptly, Klaus turns on his heel. He marches back to the perimeter of the area, stopping when the police tape tightens across his waist.

"Hey, I'm sorry, sir, you have to stay on that side of the tape," an officer calls out.

Klaus summons up a bright smile. "Of course, officer!" he calls out merrily. "I'm just gawking, don't mind me!"

The man's face gains that familiar look of annoyance. Good, annoyance makes people want to ignore him. And sure enough, the officer turns his back on Klaus pointedly.

With that taken care of, Klaus embarks on trying to catch the ghost's attention.

Dave settles in next to him and gives him a sideways glance. "You sure you're up for this?"

"He talked to a couple dozen, right before he got sent to Vietnam," Ben says, sliding in on his other side. "He'll be fine. We need to find out what happened to Vanya."

After a few seconds, Klaus manages to make eye contact with the ghost. The man blinks, then jerks in surprise when Klaus gives him a little finger-wave (hello). He looks around in bemusement, before pointing to his chest and mouthing *'Me?'*

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Klaus nods slightly and beckons him over. Christ, he hopes this ghost isn't an idiot. Freshly dead ones are usually a little more coherent. Invariably, undeterrably fixated on their deaths, but coherent.

The man comes over to them. Up close, he's pretty obviously dead - there's a sizeable dent in the side of his head, and he has trouble walking that can only come from a large number of broken bones. If he was alive, he probably wouldn't be able to move a muscle.

"You can see me?" he says, when he gets close enough.

Klaus can't resist the sigh this time. "Yes, yes, I can see you, hold the applause. What happened here? How did you die?"

"I -" the ghost shakes his head. "I don't - it doesn't make sense."

"Yeah, it hits a lot of people pretty hard," Klaus says, more sympathetically than he would have a year ago. He's never been all that understanding of people who whine incessantly

about their deaths, because *he has heard it, thank you very much.* But after those horrible minutes of trying to hold Dave's chest together, the endless two days where he wasn't sure he'd ever get to see him again….he understands a little better how normal people think about death now. "But, you know, uh, eternal reward, and all that?"

Ben snorts. Klaus throws him a middle finger without looking away from the ghost. Who looks even more confused now. Crap.

"No…." the ghost shakes his head again. "No, I mean - I don't know, I - it was like *magic* or something, it didn't make sense…."

"Uh…." Klaus exchanges confused glances with Ben and Dave. "Come again?"

"Why don't you start from the beginning," Dave suggests.

The ghost blinks. "Okay," he says, a little helplessly. "That was - I guess that was when this guy approached me and a couple of my friends to beat him up in front of his girlfriend."

Now it's Klaus' turn to blink. "Okay," he says. "Not where I expected that to go. Wait, was this girlfriend very short? Like, I'm talking pocket-sized leprechaun short. Shorter than a thirteen-year-old. Small enough to make anything she stands next to look comically oversized. Like she'd get a casting call to play the lead Munchkin. Oh, and wearing this scarf?"

He holds up the scarf, and the ghosts twitches. "I - yeah. That was her. We were just gonna rough him up some, that's what he asked for. But we started drinking, and when they came along, things got - out of hand."

"Wait," Klaus straightens. "Did you hurt her?"

The ghost steps beck, his face flickering into some unidentifiable emotion. "I - not *me* -"

Klaus sucks in a breath, and feels his hands forming into fists. "She was *hurt?*" he says, and it comes out as more of a *growl.*

"Why do you care?" the ghost snaps suddenly, his face twisting. And oh, there's that familiar rage, he was wondering when that would show up. Well, that's fine, Klaus is *pretty sure he's feeling more rage than this fucker right now.*

"I care because that's my *sister* you fuckers attacked," Klaus hisses, feeling Ben looming beside him. "So if she got hurt as a result of you *assholes* deciding to go on a bender, I can say with pretty solid certainty that your afterlife is going to be *very fucking painful.*"

"Well, your *sister* is the one who *killed me,* so I'd say she can take care of herself!" the ghost snaps back.

And

Klaus

blinks.

“Um,” he says. “....What?”

“She killed you?” Dave says urgently. “Vanya Hargreeves?”

“If that’s her name,” the ghost says, face twisted into a rictus of hate. “We were beating up the guy, and she wasn’t even in the way, but she ran in and - *did* something, and then we were dead. She *killed* us!”

“Wait,” Klaus shakes his head. “Wait, no, Vanya wouldn’t - she wouldn’t kill anyone. You’re wrong. Maybe it was the boyfriend.”

“I know who it was!” the ghost growls. “It was *her!* There was this - *thing,* like a forcefield. It pushed us away so hard I smashed into the wall! I didn’t imagine that! Ted got thrown into the truck over there, he died too! It was like magic, or something! Superpowers, I don’t know. But it was *her!*”

Dave frowns, and looks over at Klaus. “I thought you said Vanya doesn’t have powers?”

“She doesn’t,” Ben steps back, shaking his head. “She doesn’t, she never has. She’s ordinary, she can’t have powers -”

“Wait,” Klaus says. “Say that again.”

Ben blinks at him “Vanya can’t have powers?”

“No,” Klaus says. “Before that.”

“....She’s ordinary?”

Klaus stares at his brother.

Because yes, Vanya is ordinary. They’ve known this their whole lives. Out of the seven children dearest Daddy adopted, there was one single one without any powers at all. One without anything to make her special at all. One of these things is not like the others, one of these things is different ~

And it’s not like they ever questioned this. It’s been like that for as long as they can remember. Sure, it was objectively kind of strange that Vanya, who was just as much of a spontaneous Jesus birth as the rest of them, didn’t have any powers whatsoever, but that’s the way the cookie crumbles. Dad would have been *overjoyed* if little Number Seven showed any hint of powers, but she just never did.

….Right?

The world seems to tilt a little, everything sliding to the side by a few degrees.

Because - the thing is, Vanya is ordinary. They’ve known this their whole lives. But if they have, then - how would Dad have known for so long? How would he have known, even when

she was a toddler, that she didn't have any powers whatsoever? Klaus vaguely remembers hearing Mom say that it wasn't determined what his own power was until he was four. He's almost positive Vanya was already deemed ordinary by the time they were four.

Klaus feels nauseous, gut churning. It feels like there's a missing puzzle piece, something that will snap everything into crystal-sharp clarity. He thinks - he thinks he might even have it in his hands. But he doesn't want to look, doesn't want to touch it, because if he puts it in place the world will crumble beneath his feet.

"Klaus?"

He looks at Ben. The afternoon light streams down, illuminating the area. It's too bright. Everything is too bright.

"Klaus, what's wrong?" Ben asks.

"Babe?" Dave says.

"Is -" Ben looks uncertain. "I mean - Vanya *is* ordinary….right?"

Klaus sucks in a deep breath

"Why," Klaus rasps, then swallows. "Why do we always use that word."

"Ordinary?" Dave says. He frowns. "I don't know. Why do you?"

Ben looks at him with uncomprehending eyes.

"Because," Klaus says, slowly. "Because. Dad told us to. More - more importantly -"

- he had me try rumoring her to think she was ordinary. Didn't work, obviously -

Click.

"- *Allison* did."

****

"We have to find her," Klaus says, slamming the car door. "We *have* to. If she's rediscovering her powers, she's probably - terrified, confused, guilty - fuck, she *killed* people. That's like the worst introduction to new powers ever."

"This is insane," Ben says.

"Well, believe it or not, it's true!" Klau throws up his hands, before starting the car.

"Oh, I believe it," Ben says darkly. "It sounds exactly like something Dad would do. If she had poor control as a kid, he'd definitely just brainwash her." He thinks for a moment, before looking uncomfortable. "I wonder how *bad* her control was, though. I mean, *I* was…."

“Well,” Klaus says, peeling off the road and driving (bumpily) along the grass. “I think that might be a little bit of a bad example. When you were tiny, your tummy tenants correspondingly had less of an opening to squeeze through. And worst comes to worst, just run away, it’s not like you could move around much when you opened up. But if Vanya has - energy blasts or whatever, and *apparently* they’re emotion-based, or at least get stronger when she’s upset….Dad didn’t exactly treat us all that well, as kids.”

It takes Ben a moment to grasp what he’s implying. “You think she *attacked Dad?*” he gapes.

“Well,” Klaus says, glancing over at Ben and raising his eyebrows. “He was always wanting us to be stronger, right? Why would he enforce a lifetime of brainwashing - and drugging! - on one of the most powerful of us from toddlerhood, in that case? What would make *that* seem like a perfectly reasonable course of action to Reginald Hargreeves?”

Ben looks sick. “Oh god.”

Klaus swallows. There’s silence in the car for a few long seconds.

“....I know this is probably a bad time to say it,” Dave says. “But your family is *really* fucked up, babe.”

That gains a burst of slightly hysterical laughter from Klaus. Ben buries his face in his hands and lets out a high-pitched sound.

“There’s never a bad time to say that,” Klaus informs Dave. “Although it’s kind of like saying ‘water is wet’. Kind of an obvious-fact thing.”

“We should search for her,” Ben says suddenly, twisting to look back at Dave. “We don’t know the exact address of the cabin, and I think Jackpine Road is kind of full of them.”

“Uh, sure,” Dave says. “But - I don’t know what she looks like. And I don’t think Klaus should be driving alone - *eyes on the road babe!*”

“They are!” Klaus lies, and returns to looking ahead.

“....Right,” Ben says. “Okay, I’ll look for her. Klaus, you keep driving - don’t go faster than this, I think you’ll break something and then Diego will break *you.*”

“Yeah,” Klaus grimaces, and glances at the little dial that *probably* indicates how fast he’s going. They’re not going very fast, in car terms. Ben is a really speedy runner, now that he’s dead. He’ll definitely be able to outpace them. “Go, go, find her.”

Ben nods, and jumps through the car door. He takes off running.

Klaus swallows again. He grips the steering wheel tightly.

“Hey,” Dave says. “We’ll find her. It’s going to be okay.”

“I hope so,” Klaus whispers. “I really, *really* hope so.”

****

It’s almost two hours later, when it’s dipped into late afternoon and Klaus is rumbling down Jackpine Road, when Ben comes racing towards the car. Klaus nearly sends them into a flip with how hard he smashes on the brakes. He looks at his brother with wide eyes.

“I found her,” Ben says. “Come on.”

Chapter 35

Five is fast asleep by the time they get back to the Academy, which is really not much of a surprise. At least a third of Klaus' motivation for playing Ghost Tag was to exhaust him into a coma, because he sure wasn't going to get enough sleep otherwise. Klaus is pretty sure Five has been running on willpower alone for the past week.

He's making his way to Five's room when he runs across Diego. His pointiest brother looks to be in full-on Brooding Mode, and stops still when he sees Klaus.

Klaus manages to wave a little without jostling Five too much. "Hey, Di," he says, keeping his voice low.

Diego stares at him for a moment.

"Where did you go?" he says. It sounds a little - off. Like it's hard for him to get the words out. Klaus hopes his stutter isn't coming back.

"Could you keep your voice down?" Klaus says, because he knows how Diego would react to anyone mentioning his stutter. Plus, it really would be upsetting to have Five wake up right now. "Five's being a sleepyhead, and he's missed way too much sleep already this week."

Turning, he enters Five's room. Delores, sensible woman that she is, doesn't talk once she sees Five.

It's a bit of an adventure to settle Five down on the bed without waking him, but Klaus has learned to take full advantage of going selectively incorporeal. Soon enough, Five is detached from him and sprawled out on the bed. He shifts a little, and mumbles something. Klaus runs a hand through his hair to quiet him.

"Where did you go, Raithe?" Diego says, standing in the doorway.

Five shifts at the sound. Klaus glares at Diego and makes a face, and keeps combing through Five's hair. It's a testament to either Five's exhaustion or his faith in Klaus that he doesn't wake up at the sound of someone talking, and instead settles back down.

"What did I say about *quiet,*" Klaus mutters to Diego. Five sighs in his sleep.

Diego's hand clenches into a fist, and his stance changes. "Stop avoiding the question. *Where. Did. You. Go.*"

Klaus almost hisses as Five moves again. He quickly pulls up the covers and covers his little brother, resting a hand on his forehead for a second. Luckily, Five relaxes again. Klaus then marches over to Diego and not-so-gently steers him out into the hall, closing Five's door behind him. Delores will keep an eye on Five, right now he needs to have a little chat with Diego.

“Do you not understand the meaning of the word ‘quiet’?” he asks Diego, pulling them down the hall. “Because I thought you were a vigilante, and generally that *does* involve some level of stealth. Or was I mistaken?”

He barely gets a warning before Diego rips his arm out of Klaus’ hand. Instantly, Klaus stops channeling superstrength and lets go. Christ, he needs to stop doing that, Diego nearly got a dislocated arm.

Baring his teeth, Diego steps back. *“**Raithe.** Where. Did. You. **Go.**”*

“Oh, for -” Klaus throws up his hands. “Out! We went out! Explored the city, saw the sights, you know?” And killed a few people, but Klaus would be perfectly happy to never talk about that again, thank you very much.

But Diego narrows his eyes. “Oh?” He steps closer. Klaus wonders if he’s trying to be intimidating, or something. “Then I suppose Luther was wrong about what you two set off to do?”

Klaus blinks. “Oh. Right,” he says. He ponders for a second, then sighs. “No, he was right. You’re upset too, huh?”

And Diego - stumbles backwards, his face going pale. His mouth opens, then closes.

“I’m going to take that as a yes,” Klaus says. He scrubs a hand over his face and looks over at Five’s door. Then back at Diego. “If we have a family meeting about this can we leave Five out of it? He *really* needs sleep, man.”

He waits until he gets a jerky nod from Diego, before swanning past. “Great,” he calls back. “I’ll be in the parlor, I guess.”

It’s hardly five minutes later when Diego comes to the parlor, trailed by Allison and Luther. Klaus tilts his head a little.

“Where’s Mini-Me?” he asks. *And Ben,* he adds silently, since they wouldn’t appreciate it being said out loud.

“Haven’t seen him all day,” Diego says brusquely. Klaus frowns, but before he can say anything Diego continues. “And I’m going to need you to be a little more clear, here. You killed people?”

“Yes,” Klaus says. Plainly, simply, calmly.

The blunt admission seems to catch them all off-guard. They blink at him for a few seconds, faces showing various levels of ‘stunned’.

It’s Luther who recovers first. “How many?” he says.

“Six,” Klaus says. “If you must know, we did halfsies. Three and three.”

“Was that a joke?” Allison steps forward, face darkening. “You’re making *jokes* about this? Kla-*Raithe,* you killed innocent people!”

“Yes,” Klaus says, looking between them. “We….established that. Saying it again isn’t going to make it more true, or anything.”

“Jesus fuck, do you even *care?*” Diego demands, fingering one of his knives.

“I wish we didn't have to do it,” Klaus says plainly. “I really do. But we kind of have to *not* care, when it comes to this.”

Doesn’t mean he’s always perfect about it, but - if he tells them his doubts and insecurities, his guilt and grief, they’ll rip him apart. This family is like sharks when it comes to weakness. They’re willing to pounce on any crack in anyone’s armor, in the hopes it’ll distract everybody from noticing their own. If he tells them he regrets it, even a little, they’ll attack ten times more viciously than they’re doing right now.

It’s wrong. He fucking knows that. He can’t know it any more thoroughly, not when he’s the one who stuck his hand in three people’s chests last night and watched them die. Not when he stood outside of random workplaces and waited for Five to come out, blood dotted on his hand and clothes. Not when he sometimes allows his past victim’s ghosts to come closer to him just so he can apologize, only to push them away when they start screaming at him.

“But it didn’t *have* to come to this!” Luther says, looming tall. “We could have found another way!”

“Could we?” Klaus tilts his head. “Really? And what way would that be?”

“Something that doesn’t require killing people!” Luther snaps.

“Oh,” Klaus says. “That’s something in our repertoire, now? You all learned to solve your problems without violence - or rumors?”

Allison’s face closes off. “You’ve got a lot of nerve lecturing me about rumoring people when you’re the one who just killed three people,” she says cooly.

“No,” Klaus holds up a finger. “I’m lecturing you about rumoring Five when he was in the middle of a panic attack. You don’t fucking do that -”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Diego spits. “Is it always about Five for you? You’re not his boyfriend, jesus christ!”

“You’re not, right?” Luther says.

Klaus, and everyone else, looks at Luther in disbelief and no small amount of disgust.

Luther flushes. “I mean, they are kind of -” he gestures.

“What the *fuck,*” Diego splutters. "*You’re* saying that. *You.*”

“No, Luther,” Klaus says, sighing in resignation. “We aren’t you and Allison.” Ignoring the sudden blushing and spluttering from Luther and Allison at that, he turns back to Diego. “And yeah, it pretty much is always about Five for me. You know why? Because we spent *eighteen fucking years* alone together in the end of the fucking world.” He doesn’t mention Delores, because he has the feeling they wouldn’t think she ‘counts’, or something. “You know how long that is? And Five - god, Five was *thirteen years old* when he arrived there. He was a *kid.* An actual kid, not like he is now. He was scared and traumatized and so fucking *fragile.* He needed food and water and a place to sleep and medical care - *fuck* it was terrifying whenever he got sick. I practically inhaled textbooks, and I’m pretty much a doctor now, because he was *completely* dependent on me. For eighteen years, my only job was taking care of him. Do you know what that’s *like?*”

Diego blinks. Klaus realizes he’s stepped closer to him, and is probably looming a little. He reels himself back in, and backs away. He crosses his arms and looks at his siblings.

They look - uncertain. Probably because he just admitted to willingly taking on responsibility for something. Or it might be the thing where he’s basically a doctor now.

Klaus sighs, and looks at them.

“I amputated his arm, you know,” he says, and watches the shock ripple through them. He raises an eyebrow. “What, you didn’t figure it out? Who else could have done it?” He looks away, over to the light streaming in through the windows. “It was an accident. When he was nineteen - well, a week before he turned nineteen, actually. At least he was conscious for his birthday. At least he was *alive* for his birthday. I wasn’t even sure he’d survive, the first couple days. But his arm was - really, really bad. I tried giving him antibiotics, but they only last so long, you know? All expired. So when it started to show signs of infection….” Klaus makes a ‘what can you do’ gesture.

“Christ,” Diego mutters, his face green. Luther and Allison don’t look much better.

“Yeah,” Klaus shrugs, shoving away that awful memory into the back of his mind. “So. I - he was unconscious, if you were worried about that. I figured out anaesthesia okay.”

“God,” Allison mutters. It’s not clear who, exactly, she’s talking to.

Klaus sighs again. He looks at Diego. “I don’t like killing people,” he says. “And before you ask, Five doesn’t either. But we aren’t the Five and Klaus you remember. We look the same, but we *aren’t.* It’s been *twenty-two years,* guys. You don’t know me nearly well enough to convince me that I shouldn’t have killed those people. You don’t know me at all.”

It’s something they knew would happen, of course. Even Klaus, who was much more up-to-date on his siblings before their deaths than Five was, knew they’d be coming back to virtual strangers. Fuck, even his past self, no matter how well they get along, is clearly no longer *him.* He’ll move or act or say something Klaus can remember being in character for him, but that he can’t really imagine himself doing now. Not after everything he’s seen, everything he’s done.

He's fifty-two years old. He hasn't seen most of his family for well over half his life. He loves them, of course he loves them (he's always loved them).

But they don't know each other. He wonders if they ever did.

"....Maybe we could?" Allison says, hesitantly.

Everyone looks at her. She straightens, and takes a deep breath.

"You're right," she tells Klaus, and he raises his eyebrows in surprise. He doesn't remember *any* of the people standing in front of him saying that to him before. Ever. "We don't know you, and we don't know Five. We have no idea what you've been through. It's all - hard to understand. But you're still our brothers, so - I think we should try."

She glances over at Diego and Luther. They look conflicted, but don't outright contradict her.

Klaus rocks back on his heels, crossing his arms. He can't say he expected this, but - well.

It would be….nice, to be a family. He's not sure they ever really counted as one or just tried to pretend so hard they convinced themselves (just for a little while, just enough to hurt when it broke like thin glass), but either way, it sounds like something he can get behind.

He's had enough of destruction for a lifetime.

"Alright," he says, tilting up his lips a little. He glances out the window. "Any of you have dinner yet? I can cook."

"You can cook?" Diego says, blinking. "But you don't have to eat…."

"Oh, no, I don't," Klaus says, sauntering towards the kitchen. He wonders if he should go find his younger self, but he's probably off secluded with his boyfriend. And Ben is probably playing chaperone, no matter that Dave can't actually touch Younger-Klaus. "But I had to learn cooking pretty quick if I wanted Five to eat anything more complicated than canned soup. Not that I'm panning canned soup, of course, that shit was a lifesaver *many* times over, but teenagers need a lot more variety in their diets to grow right. You would not believe the work I put into that. Did you know 'nutritionist' is an actual job? There are textbooks and everything! It's crazy! I'm not complaining or anything, they were very helpful, but *really?*"

He hears Allison let out a laugh behind him. "Yes, I know there are professional nutritionists. I have a few who work for me, actually."

Klaus sends her an incredulous glance. "And you say *my* life is weird," he huffs.

"Wait a second," Diego says. "I've been trying to get you to take care of your body for the past - I don't know, twenty years, and now you're pretty much a *nutritionist?*"

"Well," Klaus says, grinning at him. "To be fair, I don't actually have a body anymore, so you didn't *quite* succeed. But it turns out when it's Five's body, yeah, I get *real* careful."

“You said you’re a doctor now,” Luther says, like he’s trying to make sense of the words coming out of his mouth.

“If you want to call it that,” Klaus says, entering the kitchen. He makes a beeline to the fridge and squints inside. Perishable, readily accessible food is *still* a weird concept, even after four and a half years. He can’t help but eyeball which things look like they’ll have to be eaten first, and pulls out the eggs. “I studied anatomy, biology, chemistry, anaesthesiology, pathology, pharmacology, and a few other -ologies just in case. Plus a shitton of surgical techniques, although I only had to do that a handful of times, thank god. All of it’s out of textbooks, of course, but I haven’t really had trouble applying it whenever it comes up. I almost got declared a god when I saved this lord’s son with CPR in the 1200s.”

He glances over and almost bursts out laughing at the identical look on all three of his siblings faces.

“Yeah,” he says, cracking an egg into a pan and grinning. “I’m a doctor now.”

“The 1200s?” Luther blurts.

“Declared a god?” Allison splutters.

“Studied?” Diego says blankly.

“Sit down,” Klaus invites, gesturing at the table. “If we’re having storytime, you’re gonna want to be comfortable for a while. Now, the 1200s thing really wasn’t all that unusual, except for the fact that it was a protection job. When we got there, we figured out -”

Yeah, Klaus decides, as he regales his siblings with the tale of exactly how he nearly got a religion in his honor and Five had to impersonate three different clerics of three different faiths in the span of twenty minutes, *I could get used to this.*

Maybe they could be a family after all.

Chapter 36

Five mostly wakes up only because he has to pee.

He grumbles to himself, half-awake, as he stumbles to the bathroom. After taking care of business, he staggers back to his room and flops back down on his bed.

And finds that he can't get back to sleep.

It's not a matter of willingness. Five would love nothing more than to sink back into the cozy depths of nothingness. A glance at the clock reveals that he's only been asleep for a couple hours. Not nearly long enough to catch up on all he's missed. He knows Klaus would insist on sleeping for much longer, preferably until tomorrow afternoon or such. Five definitely feels like he could pull that off.

That is, if he were able to ignore the fact that Klaus isn't here.

It's ridiculous. Five is an adult, and he very definitely knows that Klaus is safe and unharmed. The Commission is dead, and even if they weren't it would be a little tricky for them to attack him, considering how well that turned out last time. Klaus is almost certainly the most dangerous being on the *planet.* It's completely nonsensical to worry about him just because he isn't in Five's field of vision.

Five carefully regulates his breathing.

He's probably off talking to their siblings. Catching up on everything he's either forgotten or didn't take in the first time around. Or maybe he's having sex with his younger self. He *was* looking forward to that, and they still don't know if the world is definitely not going to end. This might be his only chance.

…..He should have left a *note,* though. That's really just basic courtesy.

'Can't sleep?' Delores says.

He grimaces, craning his head around to face her. "Not really," he says with frustration.

'What could possibly be the cause of that, I wonder,' she says dryly.

"Shut up," Five mumbles. Childish, but he's too tired to come up with anything better.

'You know you aren't going to be able to get back to sleep until you go and find him,' she says. *'Might as well get it over with. And you'll stop feeling anxious.'*

"I don't feel *anxious,*" Five lies.

Delores gives that statement all the attention it deserves, which is none. *'It's alright to be afraid, Five,'* she says, gentling her tone. *'You thought he was dead - that he was something*

even more permanent than dead. He'll understand if you're clingy for a time. Isn't he acting the same way?'

"Not to the point where he can't let me out of his sight," Five argues. "That's something only *I'm* having trouble with."

'I think it might be a bit different for him,' Delores acknowledges. *'He never thought you were subjected to cessation of existence. I'm fairly certain he doesn't consider death to be the paradigm shift everyone else does. He did, however, think he'd never get to see you again, and he has been acting like that, hasn't he? He certainly hasn't been complaining about your need to be near him.'*

"....Yeah," Five says. "Yeah, I guess you're right." He sighs, and scrubs a hand over his face. "Fuck, we're really fucking codependent, aren't we."

*'I don't think it's the **worst** thing in the world,'* Delores says diplomatically. *'But I do think you would benefit from some low-stakes interaction with your other siblings moving forwards. Once the world doesn't end, of course.'*

"There *are* no low-stakes interactions with my other siblings," Five sighs. He waves a hand to forstall her reply. "Yeah, yeah, I'll do it. Klaus would make me anyways."

'He's always been the sensible one, of the two of you.' Delores says. It's hard to tell if she's teasing or not.

Five snorts. "You have an interesting definition of the word 'sensible,'" he tells her. "I struggle to imagine flooding the bunker as the *sensible* course of action."

'You do have a point,' she allows. *'I suppose it would be more accurate to say that you two switch off on who is more sensible, with no indication of who is who at any given moment. Is that better?'*

"Not necessarily, but it's probably more accurate," Five sighs, before looking at the door. "....I'm going to go look for him. Want to come?"

'Please,' she says.

So he embarks on a walk through the mansion to find Klaus, Delores perched on his hip. He doesn't call out, because he doesn't feel like attracting attention from his other siblings just yet. But he finds a mysterious lack of them, as well. He frowns.

Delores suggests the kitchen. Which would be a strange place for Klaus to be, but Five supposes it *is* getting close to dinnertime, and Klaus was muttering yesterday about how to feed him now that he's a teenager again.

Five realizes, with a sinking sense of resignation, that that Klaus is going to go through that whole thing where he's fanatical about what to feed Five to let him grow up healthy *again.* Except this time, he's going to have a *lot* more resources. And maybe even *assistance.*

It's not exactly on par with the realization that he's going to have to go through puberty once more, but it's up there. Five suppresses a groan.

As he approaches the kitchen, he hears Klaus' voice. That would be entirely reassuring all on its own if there weren't two Klauses currently running around, so he has no idea if it's *his* Klaus he's hearing. He picks up the pace a little.

But sure enough, when he enters the kitchen it's his Klaus standing by the counter, waving his hands wildly at precisely half their siblings. He breaks off from whatever story he's telling when they come in.

"Five!" Klaus says delightedly, and immediately comes over for a hug. They have to shift around to include Delores, but it still ends up being quite cozy.

"Hey," Five says. He feels himself relaxing.

"You should still be in bed," Klaus says, sounding vaguely disapproving. He leans back and taps beneath Five's eyes. "You could carry a week's supplies in those bags."

"You're making dinner, though, right?" Five says, looking at the table. Luther, Diego, and Allison are watching them with various levels of bemusement.

"Indeed I am!" Klaus says, letting go of Five and ushering him to a seat. Delores gets set on the chair next to him. A few seconds later, a plate is set in front of Five. "Scrambled eggs," Klaus says. "Don't say I never did anything for you."

"Oh," Five says, straightening. He grabs his fork and digs in. They're *excellent.* Eggs are something he never realized he was missing out on during the apocalypse, and he avoided eating them for months after joining The Commission thanks to leftover paranoia over perishable food. But once he got over the bulk of that, eggs quickly rose to become some of his favorite food. They aren't really comparable to marshmallow-peanut-butter sandwiches, of course, but Klaus is much less pissy about letting him eat all the eggs he wants.

Nobody speaks for the next couple minutes. Klaus hums idly as he bustles around the counter, putting more eggs onto plates. Everyone gets one, even Delores. Five eyes hers once he finishes his own.

'You can have mine if you like, Five,' Delores says graciously.

"Thanks, Delores," Five says, taking it.

Klaus mock-gasps. "Delores! Don't you like my cooking?"

'I'm sure it's wonderful, Klaus,' Delores says. *'But Five needs all the food he can get, right now.'*

"Exactly," Five nods, pointing his fork at her. "I'm a growing boy. Again."

Klaus pouts. "Fiiine," he sighs.

Five smirks, and continues eating.

"...Um," Luther says.

"Are you two talking to a mannequin?" Diego asks, sounding like he knows the answer but has to confirm it before he continues any other course of action.

"Yeah?" Klaus says. "Oh, right, Five didn't mention Delores to you. Wait, Five, have you just been keeping her cooped up in your room?"

'He has,' Delores says. *'It wasn't a hardship, I've been stationary for much longer.'*

"She's right," Five says. "This past week can't really compare to winter."

"....Okay, but she's also right in that this *isn't* wintertime, and it's really not fair of you to not let anyone else know she exists when you were having a gradual mental breakdown. She had to handle that all on her own *and* she couldn't go out, Five, that deserves an apology."

Five winces. "....Right, you're right." He looks at Delores. "Sorry about that."

'Apology accepted,' she says.

"....What," Diego says.

Klaus sighs. "Okay! Delores, this is Luther, Allison, and Diego," he points at them in turn. "I'm sure you remember our stories. Everyone, this is Delores. She is our wonderful acquaintance from the apocalypse, and an invaluable addition to the family. Be nice."

They look at Delores.

"....She's a mannequin," Allison says, sounding like she genuinely might be worried they don't know this.

"Is there a problem with that?" Five says, changing his hold on his fork. Klaus gently pulls it out of his grip. Probably wise. Five doesn't *actually* want to stab them.

"She's a *mannequin,*" Luther repeats, looking horribly awkward. "I, uh, I don't think mannequins can join the family…."

"Don't be speciesist, Luther," Klaus says, before Five can jump up and curse at him. "And of course she can, she and Five have been going steady for seventeen years now. If your standards are so stringent that they have to tie the knot before you'll deign to call her our sister-in-law, I suppose I did get ordained that one time…"

"I'm not sure that counts," Five says dubiously. "Nobody remembers that religion ever even existed."

"Well, I'm not so sure modern priests will be any more understanding than Luther, so…." Klaus trails off.

“Wait,” Diego blurts. “Wait, you - what?”

“I got ordained once,” Klaus says patiently. “But our mission was to make sure that religion never got off the ground, so I’m not so sure I still qualify -”

“Not that,” Allison says. “Five, you. Um. You’re in a. Relationship. With the mannequin.”

“She has a *name,*” Five snaps.

“Right!” Allison raises her hands. “Right. Sorry. But - you are?”

“Yes,” he says bluntly.

Allison opens and closes her mouth. She looks helplessly at Luther, who doesn’t seem to be processing this information any better than her.

Diego, on the other hand, lets out a laugh, and sags against the wall.

“Holy shit,” he says, somewhere between disbelief and fascination. “Holy shit, you’re both cracked in the head.”

“Well, that’s nothing new,” Klaus says bemusedly, putting a warning hand on Five’s shoulder. “Gotta say, though, I don’t see why you’re making a big deal about this. Mom isn’t human, either, and we treat *her* like a person.”

Diego straightens instantly, like he always does when Mom’s personhood comes into question. “Hey,” he says. “Don’t lump in Mom with *that.*” he jabs a knife at Delores.

Five is in front of him in a burst of light. “Do *not* refer to her that way,” he hisses. His hand itches to grab one of Diego’s many knives, and only barely manages to refrain.

“Shit,” Klaus says, and then before Diego can say anything he’s between the two of them. From the way Diego jerks, he probably ran through the table. “Okay, calm down. Diego, that wasn’t an attack against Mom, what the fuck. Five, they’re idiots with no idea of what Delores is like. Delores, if you’re really that offended I can beat him up into apologizing later.”

That manages to derail whatever Diego was about to say next. “You think you could take me?” he snorts.

Five barks out a laugh. “Yes,” he says. “He totally fucking can.”

“Dude, I can *go invisible and intangible at will,*” Klaus says. “I can take anyone and everyone in this or any other room. Or city. Don’t even try.”

The look on Diego’s face is not one of someone who has been dissuaded from trying at some point in the future. Before he can reply, though, Klaus speaks again (disappointingly enough, because Five would love to see a fight between the two of them. He hasn’t had popcorn in years).

“Really, though,” Klaus continues, “What’s with all the intolerant attitudes around here? Mini-Me was the only one who was cool with Delores.”

“Of course he was,” Allison sighs, putting her head in her hands.

“Where is he, anyways?” Five asks, finally deigning to respond to Klaus’ unsubtle nudging back to his seat. The last of his eggs are getting cold, after all.

“Dunno,” Klaus says, looking at their siblings. “Probably secluded somewhere with his boyfriend.”

“Klaus has a boyfriend?” Luther says, surprised.

“Is he plastic, too?” Diego drawls.

“Nah, he’s dead.” Klaus waves a hand. “They had their big reunion last night, it was very moving.”

“Wait, what?” Allison says. “He’s dead? Klaus had a boyfriend who died, and he never mentioned?”

“Hey, wait,” Luther says. “If he had a boyfriend, didn’t you *also* have….”

“Uh, no,” Klaus frowns. “The boyfriend is from….”

He trails off, before sighing and pinching the bridge of his nose. Without looking at Five, he says, voice flat, “They don’t know, do they?”

“Know *what?*” Diego snaps, fists clenched. He looks kind of pissed. “You know, you two have been keeping a *lot* of shit from us, and I’m just about *sick* of it.”

“I guess they don’t know,” Five shrugs. “I wasn’t very communicative at the time, and he *was* kind of shell-shocked. I’m surprised they didn’t pick up something was off, though. Didn’t you notice Klaus was in suspiciously good shape for someone who’d been kidnapped and tortured for most of a day?” he asks them.

Luther's face turns stormy, but it’s Diego who speaks first. “Oh, it was suspicious, all right. He didn’t even wait to give up info. Sorry to rain on your little parade.”

Five *slams* his fork into the table.

Everyone except Klaus jerks back.

“Is that what you think?” Five says, very quietly. “That he betrayed us without a second thought? The moment they looked at him threateningly?”

“Five,” Klaus says, putting a hand on his shoulder. Five doesn’t shrug it off, but he doesn’t pay it any mind, either.

“I suppose I must have been hallucinating, then,” Five continues, voice perfectly level. “When I jumped into that motel room. Because it sure looked to *me* like he’d been getting tortured for hours and hours. It might have been the blood, or the burns, or the little dish of fingernails. You know. Subtle hints.”

Three faces stare back at him. They look a lot paler than normal.

“What?” Luther says, faintly. “But - he didn’t have -”

“Any wounds? No,” Five says. “Funny how time travel works.”

“He time-travelled?” Allison blurts.

Five takes a deep breath. “Agents of The Commission are issued a time-travel device in order to fulfill their duties,” Five says, his voice slipping into a flat recital of facts. “These devices are difficult to program, but simple to activate. After taking care of the agents in the motel room and freeing him, my attention lapsed. Klaus found theirs and accidentally activated it. He was sent right into the middle of the Vietnam War, and remained there for ten months before he managed to return, which is enough time for his injuries to have healed. While he was there, he started a relationship with a fellow soldier, who then died. They were just reunited last night.

“So,” Five says. “No, he didn’t just ‘give up info.’”

There is a long, long silence.

Klaus sighs. “You know,” he murmurs to Five, “We might want to space out the bombshells a little more. This can*not* be healthy for their stress levels.”

“They wanted to know,” Five says flatly.

This exchange manages to shock their siblings out of their statue impersonation. As one, they all blink and shake off their stupor.

“Oh god,” Allison says, eyes wide.

“Fuck,” Diego says, face chalk-pale. “God - fuck - *fuck!*”

“A war?” Luther says, opening and closing his mouth. “He was in a war?”

“The dog tags,” Allison says. “Oh god, he was wearing dog tags.”

Diego turns and, without saying another word, punches his fist through the wall.

Klaus sighs. “Okay,” he says. “Clearly, this is kind of raw for everyone. I suggest we -”

“We have to find him,” Allison says, standing up. “We have to - we have to apologize.”

“What?” Klaus says, caught off-guard.

“That would be good,” Five says mildly.

“Yeah,” Luther says, running a hand down his face. “Yeah, we should - we should apologize.”

Diego gives a short, stiff nod.

“What,” Klaus says.

“Well, then,” Five says, sliding out from his chair. “Let’s go find him, then.”

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They don’t find him.

“He’s not in the Academy,” Five says, jumping across the room. He’s tired, much too tired to be jumping, but at the same time he has a swirling excess of energy crashing inside of him. It feels like he’ll explode if he doesn’t bleed it off. “Why isn’t he, he should *be here.*”

“He should be,” Klaus agrees, looking worried. “I don’t know where else he’d go - not when he knew I’d come back.”

“You think he went looking for you?” Five asks, imagining the horrors that could befall his very alive and very *vulnerable* brother out on the streets. Fuck, he’s *barely* a day sober.

“Why would he go looking for you?” Diego asks, twirling a knife. They’re all arrayed in the parlor, gathered together after a full search of the Academy didn’t turn up anything.

“I can keep the ghosts away,” Klaus says, biting his lip. “He got sober, last night, and between Dave and I we can keep him that way, but he said he’d be okay with me leaving. He didn’t like it, but that’s all the more reason not to go out looking for me, he didn’t know where I was going but he *knew* I was coming back….”

Allison looks kind of pitying. Five already hates the words she says even before they come out of her mouth. “Look, Raithe,” she says. “It’s been - a long time since you’ve felt withdrawal, right?”

“He didn’t go looking for drugs,” Five snaps, jumping again. This time he gets hit with a wave of vertigo, and stumbles. Klaus darts forward and puts his hands firmly on Five’s shoulders. An order to stop. Grudgingly, Five does.

“He….might have,” Klaus says slowly.

“He *didn’t,*” Five says again, looking up at his brother and scowling. God, why can’t Klaus ever have faith in himself?

“He probably did,” Diego says with a sigh. “Face it, Five, he went to get high.”

“Is that what you thought when he was kidnapped?” Five hisses at him.

Diego actually flinches at that. But Five doesn't wait to hear a rejoinder, and he whirls back around to face Klaus.

"Summon Ben," he says.

""""What?"""" three voices say in unison. Klaus doesn't say anything, but raises his eyebrows so high they enter orbit.

"Summon Ben," Five repeats impatiently. "Like you did with Dave. He'll know where Klaus is, he can tell us if he's in trouble."

"What the hell," Luther says, stepping forward, face darkening. "Five, I know you're upset, but don't go throwing Ben's name around like that."

"Oh, alright," Klaus says, ignoring Luther. "Probably the best course of action. And hey," he wiggles his eyebrows. "I'm pretty much recovered now, so."

"That's good," Five says, letting a small smile slip out. "I'd like to see him."

"Hey," Diego snaps, low and angry "Klaus, you're still pretending you can see Ben? After all this time? And you got Five to buy into it? What the *fuck* is wrong with you?"

Klaus pays them no mind, closing his eyes and humming slightly.

"Raithe," Allison says, sounding like she's struggling to keep her composure. "Stop. Just stop."

"Five, you actually believe this?" Luther questions incredulously.

"Oh!" Klaus says, and looks to the side. He smiles. "That was easy. Hey, there Benny. Miss me?"

"Klaus," Diego barks, pulling out a knife. "What the *fuck* -"

Then Klaus gestures.

And

there

is

Ben.

"- did I get here?" he's asking.

"I summoned you!" Klaus says, and gives jazz hands. "Yay! It was actually much easier than I was expecting, I thought Dave might be a fluke, but nope, doesn't seem like it."

Five is too busy staring to take in much of what they're saying, though.

Out of all his siblings, Ben is the only one he never saw as an adult. Even Vanya had her picture on the back of her book. Ben was long dead by the time Five arrived in the apocalypse, any record of his appearance wiped away. Five never knew him as anything other than the shy thirteen-year-old he left behind.

He's taller now, of course. A teenager. He has long, lanky limbs that are swamped by a hoodie Five can recite the description of by heart, because Klaus never tired of complaining about how boring the thing was. Five thinks it suits Ben, actually, but of course Klaus has eclectic tastes. Ben holds himself differently now, more at ease than Five can ever remember seeing him as. He looks unimpressed with Klaus in the way that speaks of years and years of being resigned to inevitable shenanigans.

More than anything, though, Ben looks like the brother he left behind, so much so that Five temporarily loses the ability to breathe. Four years. Just four years between when he left, and when Ben died.

"Ben?" someone breathes. There's the clatter of something hitting the floor.

Ben blinks, and looks over at everyone else. He blinks again and straightens. "You can see me?" he says. He looks at Klaus. "You're making me visible?"

"Yep," Klaus says, popping the 'p'.

"Oh," Ben says. He looks back at them. "Hi, guys. I really want to catch up, but you need to get to Klaus and Vanya *now.*"

"What?" Five says, jolted out of his stupor at seeing his brother again. "Vanya? She's in trouble too?"

"Yes," Ben says, looking deathly serious. "Klaus went to find her, she went out of town with her boyfriend, but - he's bad news. *Really* bad news."

Five straightens. "How?" he snaps. "Did he hurt her?"

"He's manipulating her," Ben says. "Using her. He's murdered at least one other woman before. And if he hasn't hurt her yet, I'm pretty sure he will, because - fuck. Five, he only has one eye."

The

world

stops.

"Oh," Five says. The word sounds like it's coming from very far away.

"Oh god," Klaus says. His face is deathly pale. "Oh, god."

"They're alone with him," Ben says. "Vanya and Klaus, right now. I was just there, and now I'm here, and I don't know -"

There's a high-pitched noise, like a horribly wounded animal might make. Five has just enough presence of mind left to realize it's coming from him.

"Five -" Klaus says. He's in front of Five now, hands on Five's shoulders. Except he can't be. He's not real. It can't be Klaus in front of him, because Klaus is dead. He's dead, body buried in a shallow grave, torn apart in a mess of silver-blue light, swept away in a tide of blue. He's dead, he's dying, over and over again, and Five thought it couldn't get any worse but now Vanya's face is there too. She's dead as well, body left somewhere lonely and forgotten, and this must be what happened the first time around, she was the one-eyed-man's first victim, a prelude to the end of the world, and now it's happening again but *now Klaus dies like this too over and over and over he can't ever save them they're dead they're dead they're deaddead**dead -***

Someone is saying something but it doesn't make any sense, syllables jumbling together, colors and shapes moving in front of him too fast too much they're dead they're dead he failed they're dead he can't breathe can't move they're dead there's no air is he dying too maybe he can see them and say he's sorry but they're dead they're dead he can't *breathe* and they're dead they're all dead there's nothing left nothingnothingnothing they're dead they're dead he failed they're dead it's just ash and blood and silence and no air and -

darkness.

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Klaus pulls up next to the cabin in a positively cinematic spray of gravel. He leaps out of the car and races up to the door.

“Klaus,” Ben says.

He pauses, and looks back at his brother. “Yeah?”

“The boyfriend is here, too,” he says, nodding at the car.

Taking a moment to scowl at the car, Klaus looks at Ben in confusion. “So?”

“So,” Dave says, also frowning at the car. “That part where he paid guys to beat him up in front of your sister is pretty sleazy. I wouldn’t put it past him to have a few other tricks up his sleeve.”

“Okay,” Klaus says. “I get what you’re saying. I really do. No one knows scumbags like me. But I think the focus here should be on Vanya right now? You know, our sister who’s suddenly rediscovered her powers and accidentally killed two people with them?”

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t focus on her,” Ben says. “Just to be careful.”

“Oh, Ben, of course I’ll be careful,” Klaus says, pounding the heel of his hand (hello) on the door. “Soul of caution, that’s me.”

“Ah, hell,” Dave sighs. “I remember what your definition of caution looks like, Klaus.”

“So do I,” Ben mutters. “It’s not reassuring.”

Before Klaus can answer to this *slander* on his good name, however, the door opens and Klaus sees his tiniest sister’s blinking face.

“Vanya!” Klaus exclaims brightly, barging in through the door and entering a rather lovely little living room. It brings to mind words like ‘rustic’ or ‘quaint’. There’s wood furniture and a brick fireplace and a breathtaking view of the forest and lake. “Fancy meeting you here, what are the odds?”

“Klaus?” Vanya says, completely bewildered.

She makes a surprised little squeaking sound as he wraps her up in a hug. He’s never really hugged Vanya much, before. All his siblings grew sick of him constantly trying to touch them when they were kids, and Vanya was no different. She described him as clingy and childish in The Book, which he supposes is fair. Honestly, though, for someone who complained about never getting affection, he wonders why she saw it that way.

Since Vanya hasn't grown at all since age eleven, it's very easy to wrap her up in a hug. He feels her tensing, and almost moves away before she relaxes and hugs back. Confusedly, but she does.

"What are you doing here?" Vanya says.

"I can't go for a long walk in the woods and coincidentally stumble across my baby sister's little love retreat?" Klaus says.

"We're the same age," Vanya replies automatically, and before Klaus can say something stupid and irrelevant like *'no we aren't, actually,'* she pulls away from the hug and continues, frowning, "Why are you here, Klaus?"

"Ah," Klaus shoves his hands in his pockets. "Well. You see, about that -"

"Vanya?" a voice says. "I thought you were going to practice -"

A man comes out from one of the back rooms. He's handsome enough, in a generic kind of way. Klaus wouldn't say no to him for a hookup, but even if his heart wasn't firmly attached to Dave he wouldn't think of this guy as a potential boyfriend.

There's also the fact that he's missing an eye.

"Oh," the man stops when he sees Klaus, blinking. "Uh. Hello. You're - who are you?"

Maybe it's that Klaus knows this guy isn't a squeaky-clean as he appears to be. Maybe it's Klaus' extensive experience with liars. Maybe it's the white gauze taped over the guy's eye socket. Maybe it's all those things put together.

But one thing becomes perfectly, crystal-clear to Klaus in that moment:

This guy knows *exactly* who Klaus is. And he is very, very bad news.

"....Hi," Klaus says, unsubtly stepping between Vanya and the guy. "I'm Klaus. Vanya's brother. And you are?"

"Klaus," Ben says, voice low and urgent, "His *eye.*"

"What about his eye?" Dave asks.

Klaus flicks his fingers at Ben to indicate he's picked up on the lack of eye, yes.

"I'm Leonard," the guy says, and produces an entirely fake smile. "Vanya's boyfriend. Vanya, did you invite him here?"

"No, I didn't," Vanya says. She sounds more bemused than upset, but Klaus eyes the distance to the door and tries to figure out how quickly he can usher an uncooperative sister out of it. "I was just asking - how did you know where we were?"

“Oh, you know me,” Klaus wiggles his fingers with a grin, making sure to keep Leonard in his eyeline. “Spies everywhere.”

“Wait,” Vanya says. “You mean ghosts? But you can’t see them when….”

“When I’m high, yeah,” Klaus agrees. “But guess who’s almost two days sober?” He makes jazz hands.

Leonard’s eyes sharpen. Klaus….takes note of that.

“That’s - that’s great, Klaus,” Vanya says. “But you haven’t answered my question.”

“Well,” Klaus says slowly. “I was in the neighborhood. And then I ran across this crime scene from last night. Dead guy told some interesting tales.”

Vanya sucks in a sharp breath, and Leonard’s eyes narrow slightly.

“Oh,” Vanya says. She sits down abruptly on a chair. “Oh, god.”

“Hey,” Klaus says, turning towards her. Ben and Dave can tell him if Leonard makes a move. “Hey, hey, hey, it’s okay. It was an accident. Powers are - well, they can be pretty overwhelming. It’s okay.”

Vanya lets out a cross between a hiccup and a laugh. She buries her face in her hands. Klaus hesitates for a second, before hugging her again.

Please don’t cry, he mentally begs her. *Please don’t cry, please please please….*

Thankfully, she only sniffles a bit. Then she says, quietly. “I wanted to tell you guys in person.”

Klaus winces. “Uh. Sorry?”

“Klaus,” Ben warns.

He looks up to see Leonard stepping closer. Klaus lets go of Vanya and moves to stand in front of her. Leonard stops, and gives a bullshit smile.

“You must care a lot about Vanya, to come out so far,” Leonard says mildly. “Out of curiosity, why were you out here already? That diner is pretty far away from the Academy.”

“I wanted to apologize, actually,” Klaus says tilting his head and giving Leonard a thin smile. “For a misunderstanding that happened a couple days ago. Could we have some privacy, if you don’t mind?”

“I’m not sure I want to leave you alone with her,” Leonard returns. “You guys have hurt her a lot.”

“You seem to know quite a lot about things that are *none of your business.*” Klaus shoots back.

“I think it *is* my business when I’m the one who’s been helping her for the past week while you’ve all been off playing superheroes!” Leonard says, stepping closer, his face darkening.

Klaus opens his mouth for a rejoinder, but he’s interrupted.

“Stop!” Vanya says, shoving her way between them. Klaus makes an alarmed noise to see her so close to Leonard, but she bats his hand away when he tries to reach for her. “Just stop, both of you. I can make my own decisions. Klaus, it’s fine, he can stay. I trust him.”

“I’m not so sure you should do that, Van,” Klaus says, not breaking eye contact with Leonard.

“What?” Vanya says, frowning at him.

“You want to know what else that ghost told me?” Klaus says.

“You know what, I think you should leave,” Leonard says firmly.

“He *told me,*” Klaus says. “That Leonard here paid him and his pals to stage that attack.”

Vanya blinks. *“What?”*

“You tell them, babe,” Dave says, alternating between sending proud looks at Klaus, concerned glances at Vanya, and dirty glares at Leonard.

“Wait, that - that makes no sense, Klaus,” Vanya says. “Leonard lost an eye! Those men *died!*”

“Yeah, I think you should leave now,” Leonard says decisively. He makes a move towards Klaus, who dances away.

“It went wrong, obviously,” Klaus says, glaring at Leonard. “They got too drunk, he never meant for himself to lose an eye. But he fucking staged that attack, Vanya, I swear it.”

“Vanya, I didn’t,” Leonard says, glaring right back. “I don’t know why he thinks that, he’s lying or high or whatever, but I promise you I *didn’t.*”

“I’m not high,” Klaus hisses. “And I’m not lying either! Vanya -”

“Shut up!” Vanya says, holding out her arms and looking frazzled. “Everybody just shut up!”

And Klaus shuts up, but not because of that.

He shuts up because of the woman that walks out from the back room.

She’s Asian, but he can’t tell her specific ethnicity beyond that. Tallish, straight black hair, reasonably attractive. She’s wearing simple formalwear, like she’s expecting to go to a cocktail party or something. Klaus doesn’t know what people wear to cocktail parties. She looks like she belongs at one, though - not just the way she’s dressed, but the way she moves

speaks of casual elegance. Like she knows every part of herself in intimate detail and has trained herself to make use of that.

She could almost pass for alive.

“Klaus,” he hears Vanya saying, “Leonard wouldn’t - he wouldn’t do that. I think the ghost you spoke to must have been lying, or confused, or something.”

“Oh?” Klaus says, sounding kind of distant to his own ears. He nods in the direction of the woman ghost, even though Leonard and Vanya can’t see her. “Do you think that one will be lying too? Hey,” he addresses her, “What’s your name?”

“What?” Vanya says, frowning.

The ghost startles a bit. “You can see me?” Then her face hardens. “My name is Helen. He murdered me.”

“Shit,” Ben says.

“Klaus….” Dave says, eyeing Leonard like he really wishes he were corporeal.

“Helen,” Klaus repeats, and he doesn’t miss the flash of panic in Leonard’s eyes. “What a lovely name.”

“Helen?” Vanya says, clearly shocked. “Helen Cho?”

Klaus glances over at her sharply. “You know her? She says Leonard here murdered her.”

“What -” Vanya steps back.

“He’s lying,” Leonard snaps. “He’s *lying.* Vanya, I didn’t do *anything* to Helen, he’s trying to hurt you by making me look bad, like you can’t trust me!”

Leonard steps closer to Vanya and *oh no he doesn’t.* Klaus squeezes himself in front of his sister, glaring bloody murder at Leonard.

“He stuffed my body in the attic of his house,” Helen hisses. Then she pauses and looks rueful. "I should have taken Grandma's defense lessons."

“Stuffed her body in his attic,” Klaus says, raising an eyebrow. “Well, that’s not very original, Leo.”

“Klaus,” Vanya says, sounding scared and uncertain. “Klaus, he wouldn’t -”

“Oh, he fucking would,” Klaus bares his teeth. “Vanya, we need to go, get out of here, we need to get back home -”

“To the Academy? To your siblings?” Leonard says, his voice taking on an edge. “Where they treat you like dirt and never tell you anything? Is that where you want to go, Vanya?”

“Stop it!” Vanya says, “Just stop fighting!”

“Klaus?”

Klaus blinks and looks over at Ben. His brother sounds - uncertain. That’s a pretty unusual state of affairs for Ben, the eternally unflappable.

What’s even more unusual - and *alarming* - is to see him *flicker.*

“Ben?” Klaus says, straightening.

“I feel weird -” is all Ben gets to say, before

he

utterly

vanishes.

“What?” Vanya frowns at him. “Ben?”

Klaus isn’t paying her any mind He spins around wide-eyed. “Ben?” he hears himself say, high-pitched and panicky. “Dave? Where’s Ben?”

“I don’t know,” Dave says, staring at where Ben just was. “He was just there -”

“Ben?!” Klaus calls out, like Ben is just hiding around the corner. Except he wouldn’t do that, not now, not when Vanya is in trouble and Klaus is scared and Leonard is -

He sucks in a breath and whirls to face Leonard. *“What did you do to Ben?”*

“What?” Leonard takes a step back.

“What?” Vanya says.

“Ben!” Klaus snaps, adrenaline crashing through him in a rising tide, sparking through his veins. “He was just here, and now he’s *gone,* ***what did you do to him?”***

“Klaus, Ben is *dead,*” Vanya says, audibly fighting to retain a steady tone.

“I *know* that, I mean his ghost! He was *right there* and now he’s *not!* Leonard did something to him!”

“You’re crazy,” Leonard sneers.

Usually Klaus would take that as a compliment, but right now all it elicts is a white-hot rage. Because - *Ben.* The one person in his family who gives a shit about him, not because of obligation like Diego or some kind of parallelized affection like Five but just because he *wants* to. And maybe Ben is getting more and more tired of Klaus every year, more cynical and apathetic and that much closer to giving up entirely, but it hasn’t happened yet. Not yet.

He might leave someday, but for now he's still here, he's still *here,* until this *fucking bastard came along and* -

Klaus barely realizes he's lunged at Leonard until his fist hits the man's covered eye socket. Leonard lets out a scream of pain and crumples to the floor. Klaus pulls back his fist for another punch but -

"Stop!"

There's a force that yanks him back, away from Leonard. It's like a giant hand just shoves him away. None too gently, either. Klaus tumbles ass over teakettle, the impact on the floor driving the breath from his lungs. He wheezes, and it takes a couple seconds for him to reorient himself.

"Klaus? Klaus, baby, look at me," Dave says. Klaus blinks up at him. He manages to groan out a reply, and props himself up on his elbows.

Vanya is kneeling next to Leonard, her hands fluttering over his face. He's moaning in pain. Vanya notices Klaus' movement and looks over at him. There's -

There's *anger* in her eyes.

"Klaus," she says. "What the *fuck.*"

Klaus shakes his head, still trying to catch his breathing. "Vanya -"

"Save it," she snaps, and Klaus gets a vivid flashback to when she slapped him, just a couple days ago. "Klaus, I don't know what the *hell* you've been taking, but that doesn't give you the right to hurt Leonard."

"No," Klaus says, straightening . His body feels like one big bruise, but nothing's broken as far as he can tell. "No, Vanya, wait, I'm clean, I swear, I'm telling the truth - he's using you, he's hurt people -"

"You're hallucinating," Vanya says. "You need to leave -"

"No, I swear I'm not, Vanya, please -"

"I'm not the ones using her," Leonard rasps.

"You *shut up,*" Klaus hisses, only to falter when Vanya glares at him again. "Wait, no, I promise, just please come home with me, *please,* Raithe can make Helen corporeal and she can tell you herself -"

"Oh, Raithe can make other ghosts corporeal now?" Vanya says. "Wouldn't he have done that with Ben, since *he's* still around?"

"He *couldn't* before, but he can now, Vanya, please just come back -"

"She's not going back there," Leonard says, gingerly sitting up.

“He’s right,” Vanya says, looking at him, her face softening. “He’s right, Klaus, I can’t go back there.”

“No,” Klaus says, horror sweeping over him. “Vanya, you can’t -”

“You *always* say that!” Vanya snaps. She jerks herself up until she’s standing. The house trembles, very slightly. “You and Dad and *everyone!* ‘You can’t do that, Vanya,’ ‘go away, Vanya,’ ‘you’re too *ordinary,* Vanya!’ I’m *sick* of it! I’m never included, never praised, never seen! I was *never* a part of this family, and I was an *idiot* to ever think otherwise!”

“Vanya,” Klaus says, his mind scrambling. He pulls himself to his feet. “I - I know. I know, okay? We fucked up. I’m so sorry. We were fucking assholes as kids, and we’re even bigger ones now. Ignoring you and insulting you and Allison’s rumor and the grief about The Book and not telling you about Mom - I’m so, so sorry, Vanya, we’re so stupid, you never deserved any of that.”

Vanya looks like she’s torn halfway between crying and screaming. Klaus raises his hands (hello, goodbye) as the house trembles again, hoping to calm her down. Fuck, he doesn’t know how to calm someone down, how did Raithe learn to do that?

“I’m sorry, Vanya,” Klaus says, trying to pour his sincerity into the words. He bites his lip. “I’m so sorry.”

His sister’s face wavers as she stares at him, breathing harsh. The air stills.

“Allison’s rumor?” Leonard says.

They look at him.

And Klaus realizes that he fucked up.

There’s a glint in Leonard’s remaining eye. It takes the span of one long, endless heartbeat for Klaus to recognize it. It’s a look he’s seen directed at him many times before, out on the streets, when someone realizes they’ve just gained the upper hand. When they realize they have him completely over a barrel, totally at their mercy. When they realize they can completely fuck him up and nothing and no one can stop them, least of all Klaus.

Triumph.

“What about Allison’s rumor?” Leonard repeats, with honey-sweet innocence. “Did Allison rumor Vanya about something?”

Klaus stares at Leonard.

He knows, Klaus realizes numbly. *He knows about Allison’s rumor. He knows about Vanya’s powers. He knows more than anyone except maybe Dad. He knows everything.*

“....Klaus?”

Mutely, he looks over at Vanya.

Her eyes are wide, darting between him and Leonard. There's a stillness to the air, but now it feels dangerous. The calm before the storm.

"Klaus," Vanya says. "Did Allison rumor me? What - what did she rumor me about?"

Klaus swallows.

The hous *shudders* suddenly. Klaus stumbles.

"What did she rumor me about, Klaus?" Vanya asks - no, demands. Her voice is harder now, expression slowly freezing over.

"She didn't understand," Klaus whispers. "She was young. We were just four. She - Vanya -"

"What did she rumor me about?"

Klaus shudders. The air is very, very cold. "She - she made you think you were ordinary," he says. "Vanya, I'm *sorry.*"

There is silence - not just silence, but perfect, absolute stillness - for exactly four seconds.

"....You knew?"

Vanya is looking at him. Except it's almost like before, with Five, and she isn't seeing him at all. Her eyes stare straight through him, into a reflection only she can see. Klaus takes a step back, before he processes her words.

"You knew I had powers this whole time?"

Klaus blinks. "What - no, no, Vanya, I didn't, I just found out -"

"Oh my god," Vanya says. "Oh my god. You knew. *You all knew.*"

"No!" Klaus yelps. "No, Vanya, wait, we didn't, Allison didn't understand what she was doing, she just told me -"

"You all knew," Vanya repeats, clearly not hearing a word of what he's saying. The wind starts swirling around her. Leonard scrambles back, disappearing into the back rooms. "Oh god, it all makes sense now. You never wanted me around because you *knew* I was more powerful than all of you, you *knew.*"

"No, we didn't!" Klaus shouts as the wind picks up. The ceiling lights sway, the picture frames rattle. The house shudders and shakes. "Vanya, please listen, I swear we didn't know!"

"Stop ***LYING!***"

Something explodes. Dave is yelling, and there's too much light, and oh, god, it's a bomb, it's a bomb, they're shooting, they're under attack, where's the ammo, where's his gun, fuck, fuck, fuck, where's the enemy, where's Dave where's Dave where's *Dave* -

- and Dave is there, but no, no, that can't be real, not Dave, no, please, no, that can't be Dave, with his chest a mess of blood bubbling up with each breath as they grow shallower and shallower, no, please no, please and -

- there's another bomb and -

- *Vanya,* what is Vanya doing here, no, she can't be here, she'll get *hurt,* there are bombs going off and gunfire closing in and smoke in the air, she can't be here, he needs to get her safe, she'll die just like Dave, please no, please -

- he grabs for her, and she looks startled, and he pulls her, and he's babbling, he knows, but he needs to get her *safe* she needs to be *safe* she'll die otherwise just like Dave and that can't happen he needs to get her *out* -

- but then she *yanks* her arm away and he cries out and reaches for her again and *no* -

and

then

there

is

white.

There's an - impact?

Something *crunches.* A lot of things, actually.

He blinks.

Colors?

Noise.

Blurriness.

He tries to move his head. His hand. Something.

Pain.

A lot of sound.

More blurriness.

A high-pitched noise.

He blinks. More colors?

A blob. A person?

The colors sharpen slightly, just enough to see.

Vanya. It’s Vanya.

No, it’s not safe. She needs to get somewhere safe.

He tries to tell her. The syllables get all jumbled. They don’t come out right.

It hurts.

He blinks at Vanya again. She’s upset?

She’s crying. Is she hurt?

He tries to talk again. She needs to get to a medic. She needs to get safe.

He can’t talk.

It hurts to breathe. He can’t breathe.

There’s too much noise. He blinks again.

There’s lots of color. Too much red.

Vanya needs to get safe.

He tries to lift his hand. It’s hard.

He pushes at her, weakly. She needs to *go*.

It hurts.

A blob comes near. It grabs Vanya.

That’s - is that good? He doesn’t know.

Is the blob taking her to safety?

Vanya leaves.

He blinks.

He can't *breathe.*

His hand is still up. It’s a blob too.

It’s bent funny, near the wrist. That isn’t supposed to happen, right?

There’s still noise.

It sounds like Dave. But Dave is dead.

Is Vanya safe?

Briefly, the world sharpens into focus.

His hand reads

(goodbye)

Chapter End Notes

Did I just make Dave watch Klaus die like Klaus watched him die? Yes. Yes I did.

Chapter 38

Klaus is running.

When he chooses to, he can run *really* fucking fast. Faster than most cars. It's draining, but very useful in certain situations - even if he'd really prefer to be faster when that sort of stuff happens. He remembers, vividly, the events that led to amputating Five's arm. Klaus had to run back to base to get medical supplies after stabilising Five. He ended up being fast enough, but god, he'd have really preferred it if he'd managed to work out the kinks in his discount teleportation back then.

He's really wishing that now, too, actually.

But no use wishing for things. Klaus just grits his teeth and pushes himself to go *even faster.*

Ben keeps pace beside him. He actually can't keep up with Klaus at top speed, but Klaus solved that problem by channeling a small trickle of energy into his brother. It's not *effortless,* especially when Klaus is running himself (it feels kind of like diverting a tiny little creek away from a crashing river, while making sure neither of them spills over their banks), but it's similar enough to making him corporeal that he can keep it up until they reach the cabin.

Everyone else is following in the car. Klaus's stomach lurches once more at the thought of not being there when Five wakes up, but Vanya and his younger self take precedence right now. At the moment. The *instant* they're safe and the one-eyed man is deader than dead, Klaus is going to hug Five and not let go for a *week.* He's *never* seen Five have an attack that bad.

It's justified, of course. But god, leaving Five, even with their siblings, goes against every instinct he's cultivated for the past twenty-two years.

He doesn't bother suppressing a grimace as he recalls -

"What do we do when he wakes up?" Allison says, face drawn as they hurry out to the car.

Klaus wavers, and the words taste sour as he forces them out. "If he can't calm down on his own, you'll have to rumor him."

Shock flits over her face. "But you -"

"I know what I said," Klaus snaps. "But I can't be in two places at once, and he ***will*** *hurt himself if he isn't stopped. When he's come back to himself he'll agree it's the most logical course of action. Just don't think this is* ***anything*** *other than an emergency measure."*

He starts sprinting before she can answer.

Now, Klaus wonders if he should have done something different. Left Five behind? Not a chance. Taken Five with him? But no, becoming corporeal would slow him down

significantly, and a panicking little brother would be a fairly unacceptable distraction when facing something of this magnitude.

Not to mention the uncomfortably large chance that they might come upon a scene that wouldn't be very helpful for Five's mental stability to witness.

Klaus swallows. He tries to run faster, and fails. Jesus *christ,* why does he even *have* limits, he's a fucking *ghost.*

"There's something I didn't mention," Ben says abruptly.

Klaus looks over at him. That would be extremely idiotic for anyone else at the speeds they're going, but intangibility has some nifty benefits. "Oh?" he says. He swears, if this situation gets any worse, he's going to scream.

"Yeah," Ben says, looking troubled. "We found out right before we found Vanya, and she confirmed it. She has powers."

Klaus trips over nothing.

Wiping out at well over a hundred miles an hour isn't very fun, even if already being dead takes care of any possibility of real damage. Klaus rolls to a stop nearly a quarter mile from where he fell, and pops to his feet, whirling to face Ben.

"She *WHAT?*"

"She has powers," Ben repeats as he jogs up, as if those words in that order make any sort of sense at all. "Some sort of - energy blast thing, I didn't see it myself. But she has them."

Standing in the middle of the road gaping is really not a productive course of action at this particular point in time, but neither is Ben dropping *this* little bombshell. Klaus opens his mouth, then closes it again.

"Okay," he decides. "That is - okay. I am going to process that *later,* because - yeah. But we really need to keep running now."

"Right," Ben says, and they're off again.

Klaus tries to organize his thoughts around this new piece of information. Vanya has powers. Vanya has *powers.* It sounds ridiculous, impossible, absurd, but Ben wouldn't joke about this. Well, actually, he *might,* but not *now.* Not when they're rushing to get to their siblings away from a madman.

The thought of *Vanya having powers* is still a strange one, though. A few times over the years, he wondered if maybe she had powers after all, except they were just too subtle for anyone to notice. It would make sense, since she's just as much of a spontaneous Jesus birth as the rest of them.

'Energy blasts' don't sound all that subtle, though.

“She’s strong,” Ben says, because even with twenty-two years of separation his brother can still read his mind. “I’m not sure how much, but she’s really strong. Dad - didn’t like that.”

Klaus *very* narrowly avoids wiping out again.

“Oh,” he breathes, the entire picture clicking into place in his mind with frightening ease. “Oh god. Her pills.”

“Yeah,” Ben says. He sounds tired.

“Fuck,” Klaus curses.

“Yeah.”

There isn’t really anything else to be said.

The landscape blurs past them. Klaus swallows again. Even the thought of Vanya having surprise powers doesn’t allay the churning terror in his gut. Powers take *time* to master, as he knows very well. There’s every chance that her abilities could turn out to be a hindrance rather than a help, should the situation go south. One more variable to consider.

He wonders if Vanya discovered her powers in his timeline. It’s entirely possible. Not like she had any reason to tell them - unless she did, and he forgot it. He’d like to say that he wouldn’t forget something like *that,* but in point of fact he did actually forget yeeting ten billion souls off this plane of existence for eighteen years, so.

He doesn’t remember Vanya’s boyfriend, either. The mysterious one-eyed man. The one he and Five have been searching for for over twenty years. The one who killed him, his family, and the world.

“We’re almost there,” Ben says, derailing Klaus’ train of thought.

“Okay,” Klaus breathes. “Okay.”

They turn off the road pretty soon, and race up up a path just wide enough for a single car. There’s a lake off in the distance, and they close in on it. On the cabin, nestled up next to the water.

Klaus doesn’t bother stopping. He barrels in through the wall, and

he

stops

dead.

Because that’s what he is.

His younger self is sprawled out on the floor, and even if his eyes weren’t open and staring it would be pretty obvious he’s dead. His limbs are twisted and tangled, half his chest is caved

in, blood is matted in his hair. There's a *lot* of blood, in fact, splattered all over the wall and soaking his clothes and pooled underneath him. It looks like he's been hit with a fucking bulldozer.

Ben makes a sharp, choked sound, and falls to his knees.

Dave is there, kneeling next to the body, tears trickling silently down his face.

"Fuck," Klaus says.

He's seen his own body before, of course. Watching Five bury it is still among one of the more surreal experiences of his life. But that was subtly different from - this. This body isn't, technically speaking, actually his. His younger self is still *him* in all the ways that count, but they've diverged into different people. Looking at this body, Klaus can't help but feel the echo of what he felt looking at his own body, *as well as* what he feels whenever someone else dies in front of him. It's a strange dissonance.

But. *But* he can't dwell on that. His younger self is dead, but he doesn't see Vanya or her boyfriend anywhere.

Klaus tears through the rest of the cabin, but he doesn't find them. There are signs of people here recently, but they're both gone. A quick look outside reveals Diego's car, but no others. *Fuck.*

He tugs on his hair and tries to think.

Wait. There *is* someone who might know where they went. Klaus whirls around and sprints back inside. Dave hasn't moved from his younger self's body. It's not clear he's even aware they're here. Ben isn't much better, staring with a vacant expression on his face.

"Dave?" Klaus says, crouching down next to the man. He feels horribly awkward. What the fuck do you say to the guy your alternate self fell in love with when you're standing right next to said self's mutilated body? But Klaus pushes that feeling away, because they're in a *bit* of a time crunch here. "Dave? Can you hear me?"

Dave blinks slowly, like he's underwater. He lifts his head slightly, and blinks again when he see Klaus. He makes a small sound, and his eyes flick between Klaus and the body uncomprehendingly.

"- Raithe," Klaus says belatedly. "I'm Raithe."

A little of the fog lifts form Dave's eyes. He says, very quietly, "Oh."

"I'm sorry," Klaus says. "I'm so sorry, Dave, but - I need to know where they went. Do you know that?"

"I…." Dave says, before shaking his head. "No. No, he pulled your sister away. She was trying to help Klaus. She was trying…." he trails off, staring at the body.

“You don’t know?” Klaus says, heart sinking to the very bottom of his stomach. “He didn’t say where he was taking her?”

“He just said they had to go. Didn’t say to where,” Dave says. He blinks slowly. “She was - she was crying. I don’t think - she didn’t mean to. I think it was an accident. She tried to help him. She was crying.”

“....What?” Klaus says. “Accident?”

“This,” Dave says. His voice sounds kind of alarmingly detached. He nods at the body. “He made her upset. She used her powers. It was all - white. She threw him….I don’t think she meant to hurt him.”

Klaus

stares.

“White?” he says, his voice very, very quiet. “It was white?”

Dave nods. “White,” he says, eyes distant. “So, so white. Bright.”

“Bright enough to outshine the sun,” Klaus says. Numbly.

“Yeah,” Dave says. “Yeah.” Fresh tears spill down his face.

“....Klaus?” Ben says.

Klaus isn’t listening.

The picture that clicked into focus in his mind earlier zooms out. Vanya has powers. She has powers that have been dulled for years - decades. She’s - fuck, if they’re just re-emerging, she’s probably stopped taking her pills. The pills that *regulate her emotions.* She has new and scarily powerful abilities, zero training in how to use them, and is currently experiencing unfamiliar and *seriously* drastic changes in her brain chemistry, not to mention the manipulative murderous psycho she’s been hanging out with for the past who-knows-how-long.

Two plus two plus two plus Vanya.

It all adds up.

If he had a stomach anymore, he would vomit.

She killed me, a small corner of his mind, undisturbed by the raging hurricane that consumes the rest of his mind. The eye of the storm. *It was her. She killed me, all those years ago, and she just did it again. She killed me, our family, and the world. It was her.*

Klaus takes a deep, deep breath.

“I need to find her,” he says aloud. “Right now.”

“Klaus?” Ben says. “What -”

“Do you know where he lives?” Klaus interrupts.

“I - yeah,” Ben says. “I don’t think they’ll go back there, though.”

Klaus nods. It’s a long shot, true, but it’s the best he’s got. “What’s the address?”

Ben tells him. Klaus actually recognizes it. It’s in a neighborhood that he and Five picked over for supplies back in their third year in the apocalypse. He wonders if they scavenged the house itself. Almost certainly yes. It’s a strange thought.

“You’re going after them,” Ben notes. His voice is neutral.

“Excellent deductive skills, Ben,” Klaus says, rising to his feet. He looks around the room. Dave follows his movement, but is clearly not very interested in anything besides the body lying in front of him. He keeps looking at it, briefly, before flicking his eyes away with a flash of raw, open pain. Only to find his eyes drawn back, again and again.

“What are you going to do?” Ben says. “If you find them.” He’s doing a better job of not looking at the body, but he can’t avoid it entirely. It’s very….spread out.

“The asshole dies,” Klaus says promptly. He steps into the dining room and snags a pen from the table. “Obviously. No question about *that.*”

“And Vanya?”

Klaus pauses and chews on his lip. “Not sure,” he says slowly. “Depends on how much control she has. I might need to knock her out, take her somewhere without other people.” He massages the bridge of his nose and sighs. “At least she can’t hurt me.”

“You’re not going to -” Ben breaks off.

Klaus stops.

He looks at Ben.

He opens his mouth. Closes it.

Something deep inside his chest *twists.*

“....You think I’d kill her?” he asks, in a very small voice.

Something close to horrified regret flashes over Ben’s face. Realization. “Raithe -”

“Klaus,” Klaus interrupts. “Ben, I’m *Klaus.* Vanya is my sister, I would *never* - why - how could you think -”

“I’m sorry,” Ben says. “I’m sorry.”

Klaus turns away sharply. He walks into another room and looks around. There's a pad of paper on a table, and he snags it. Rifling through a few drawers turns up an old tape dispenser. He brings his supplies out into the dining room again, sets them on the table.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Ben take a step towards him. Then take a step back. His fingers twitch at his side.

"It's fine," Klaus says. Quietly. "I know I'm different now. It's not much of a stretch to think I'd do that. It's okay."

"No," Ben says, just as quietly. "It's not."

Klaus doesn't reply. He writes out his note, and takes it over to the door. He tapes it on the outside, where his siblings will see it once they arrive. They probably won't listen to it, but hey. He can hope.

"You should probably stay here," he says, not looking at Ben. He glances over at his younger self's body. "I don't know when he'll manifest, there weren't clocks around the first time. He'll need some help adjusting."

"Of course," Ben says.

Klaus nods. He takes a deep breath and waves to Dave (goodbye). Dave doesn't do much more than tilt his head before returning his focus to the body. Ben goes and sits next to him.

Klaus leaves the cabin, and he starts running.

Chapter 39

Five wakes up slowly. He doesn't particularly want to. After all, he hasn't had a proper sleep in days. He's been running around (and jumping around), accumulating injuries and stress like there's no tomorrow (because if he doesn't, there *won't* be), perpetually skirting the edges of a mental breakdown (and occasionally diving straight in). He wants to fucking *sleep.*

That is, until he remembers what happened right before he blacked out.

He jackknifes up, narrowly avoiding hitting Allison. He looks around wildly. He's lying half on her lap in the backseat of a car. Diego is driving, Luther in the passenger seat. For once, they aren't arguing, even in such close proximity.

"Klaus?" Five says. His brother isn't here. Why isn't he here?

"He went ahead," Allison says at once. "He's faster. Five, are you - how do you feel?"

Five takes a deep breath. Then another. He pushes himself away from Allison to sit in the open seat.

"I'm fine," he says. There's a ringing in his ears.

Of course Klaus went ahead. He's faster than most cars, he'll be able to get to them much more quickly. To Vanya and younger-Klaus. Who are alone with the owner of the eye. The man who starts the apocalypse, the man who's already killed them once.

"Yeah, I don't think you look all that fine, man," Diego says, glancing at him in the mirror.

"I'm *fine,*" Five hisses.

"You hyperventilated yourself into unconsciousness," Luther says. He twists around to look at Five, which involves a lot more effort and movement than it would for other people. "You've been having panic attacks?"

"Of course he has, he had a few in front of us, don't you remember?" Diego says. "They weren't quite as memorable as that one, but I'd bet he's been having a lot more we haven't seen. That right?" Diego raises an eyebrow in the mirror.

Five grits his teeth. "They weren't relevant," he says. "And once Raithe came back, he knows how to handle them."

"And what about now?" Diego says.

Allison shifts slightly beside Five. He glares at Diego. "I'm *fine,*" he says.

"Alright," Diego says, clearly not believing him.

Rather than continue arguing with his *idiot* brother, Five looks out the window. The scenery zips by, but it's not fast enough. Not nearly fast enough. But that's a very familiar feeling for Five, isn't it?

"How far until we get there?" he says.

"About ten minutes," Diego says tersely. "It's up Jackpine Road. Ben -" he stumbles over the name.

There's a short silence in the car.

"...Ben what?" Five prompts. "He gave directions?"

Diego opens and closes his mouth, and swallows. Luther can only nod, mutely.

"....He's really here," Allison says, subdued. She's staring into the distance. "All this time, he's really been here."

"Yeah, of course he's been here," Five says, unimpressed. "Why wouldn't he be? You think Klaus lasted on the streets for as long as he did without someone shouting sense at him every step of the way?"

"Wait, so you just -" Diego says, looking back at him incredulously. "You just *believed* Klaus when he told you he saw Ben?"

Five growls in frustration. "Of course I did. *It's. His. Fucking.* ***Power.***"

"He was *high!*" Luther protests. "He's always high, his powers don't work when he's like that! How were we supposed to know -"

"I don't know, maybe have a little *faith* -"

"Stop," Allison says firmly. Wonder of wonders, they all do.

Allison takes a deep breath. Five clenches his teeth together so tightly his jaw cracks.

"Look," Allison says at last. "Clearly, we have - a lot of things to apologize to Klaus for. But Five, you weren't there, and you don't know how Klaus - wasn't the most reliable person around, back then."

"I read the book," Five says flatly.

"That *fucking book* -" Diego starts.

"Shut up." Allison snaps.

There's an uneasy silence. Scenery flies by.

"Wait," Luther says suddenly. "If Ben is still around, wouldn't he have survived the apocalypse as well? Was he with you guys?"

Five winces. “...No.”

“What?” Diego says. “Why not?” Allison frowns as well.

Five sighs. He looks out the window again. “....Klaus is more powerful than we thought,” he says dispassionately. “When he died in the apocalypse, he felt the rest of the world die as well. Seven billion new ghosts, all at once? It was too much for him. He snapped. They were all exorcised. Including Ben.”

“....What?” Diego says blankly. He looks back at Five, and only barely manages to regain control of the wheel when he swerves on accident. “Wait, *what?*”

“Are you serious?” Luther says. He twists to look back at Five, blinking. “Seven billion ghosts? He exorcised *all* of them?”

“Well,” Five corrects. “He also exorcised the ghosts that were already there before the apocalypse. The full total comes to around ten billion, in his estimation. I’m….not sure how he knows that number, but it sounds about right.”

Luther gapes like a fish. Diego isn’t much better.

“Oh,” Allison says, struggling to process his words. “Oh. That’s. Uh. Wow.”

“Yeah,” Five says tiredly. “Wow.”

He has to keep reminding himself of that. Klaus - his Klaus - can easily take care of himself. He’s more than strong enough to protect both Vanya and younger-Klaus from a single person, who as far as they know can’t hurt ghosts. *That man* might be able to end the world, but there’s no evidence he can kill someone who’s already dead. If that ability existed already, The Commission wouldn’t have needed to steal Five’s equations.

Five clings to that, and watches the scenery go by.

****

The cabin is situated beside a small lake. It’s built sturdily, well-kept and clean. If Five were in a more poetic frame of mind, he might call it ‘picturesque’.

He doesn’t care about the cabin’s looks, though. He cares about what’s inside it. As soon as the car begins to slow down, he jumps out of it and races up to the door. His injuries protest at this, but they can just shut the fuck up.

There’s a piece of paper on the door.

It takes longer than Five would like to admit for his eyes to be able to notice it, but he would know Klaus’ handwriting anywhere. He stops and looks at it.

He reads it.

He reads it again.

He -

He feels very distant, all of a sudden.

The sound of racing feet comes up behind him. “Five, what are you waiting for -” Luther says.

Five doesn’t answer.

“Five?” Allison says, close behind. “What’s wrong?”

“What are you all doing -” Diego says, just a second behind.

“Is that a note?” Allison says. She moves around Five to see. “Did -”

She falls silent.

“What -” Luther says, shuffling forward. Then he cuts himself off and falls silent as well.

Diego makes a small, choked sound as he also gets a good look at the piece of paper taped to the door.

It reads, simply:

Klaus is dead.

I’m going after Vanya & the boyfriend.

DO NOT GO INSIDE.

- R

“No,” Diego says. “No, no, no -”

Before anyone can react, Diego shoves himself in front of Five and darts through the door. Five doesn’t make a move to stop him. There’s a faint buzzing in his ears.

There’s a wild sort of sound from inside, like a scream of pain. Five knows that sound. Last time, he was the one who made it.

Luther breaks from his paralysis and shoves the door open, barrelling inside. Allison races in after him.

In the moment before the door swings shut, Five sees her face change. Her eyes widen, her mouth drops. Her hand comes up. She stumbles back.

The door closes.

There’s a muffled sound of horror from inside.

Five reaches out, almost carefully. His fingers brush against the paper. Slowly, he traces the letters.

Klaus is dead.

He mouths the words to himself. Again. And again.

Klaus is dead. Klaus is dead. Klaus is dead.

He places his hand flat on the paper. It covers the words. He can feel them beneath his palm, though, sharp and angular and cutting. He's surprised his skin doesn't split open and drip blood down the door.

Someone is crying, inside.

Gently, so gently, Five pushes the door open.

He steps inside.

There's so much blood.

That's the first thought that comes to mind. There's a truly enormous amount of it. The average adult human male holds five liters of blood. Five would estimate that roughly half of that is splattered against the wall and pooled underneath the body. The scent of it is thick in the air. The clothes the body is wearing are absolutely soaked with it.

Real blood is darker than the bright red stuff on television. Especially when it's dried. This isn't dried yet, but it's getting there. Right now it's viscous and sticky, seeping into the rug and the wood of the floor. Staining the surroundings a permanent, ugly shade of red-brown.

Five has seen bloodier deaths, but not many. There's so *much.*

The body can't really be said to be in much better shape. Half its chest is caved in on the right side, the lung clearly pierced several times over by the ribs. If death wasn't immediate, it definitely would have come thanks to choking on all the blood pooled there. The lower half of the body is at a strange angle, and it takes Five a moment to realize the pelvis must be crushed. Several of the limbs are broken.

The eyes are open.

The eyes are open, and they're staring up at the ceiling. They're half-lidded, looking at nothing, glazed over. Once brilliant, vibrant, bursting with color, they're now dull and lifeless. Dead.

His siblings are arrayed throughout the room. Diego is closest to the body, almost kneeling in the blood. He's crying, shoulders shaking as his hands open and close into fists. Luther is standing stock still a little further away, frozen. Allison is back against the far wall, tears running down her face. It looks like she's in danger of sliding down the wall, her legs barely able to support her.

Five stares at the body.

He tastes ash.

There's so much blood.

He takes a deep breath. He tastes the copper-penny tang in the back of his throat. He swallows it down.

Carefully, Five steps forward.

His feet carry him to - to the body. He has to remember it's just a body. Klaus is - somewhere else. Not here. This is just a body.

Five reaches out and touches Diego's shoulder.

"Diego," he says, quietly.

"What," Diego says, grief making his voice hard. His breathing is heavy and harsh.

"You should stand up," Five says. "We need to figure out what we're going to do with the body."

Diego blinks. He looks at Five.

"...What," he says. "Five, that's - that's our brother. He's not a *body,* he's *Klaus.*"

"He's dead," Five says bluntly. "He's not Klaus anymore."

"Five, why are you so calm?" Luther says, voice unsteady. He seems to have broken out of his paralysis when Five wasn't looking. "You - that -"

Five looks at the body.

"There's more blood, this time," he says, voice distant as the stars. "But I have seen this before."

No one seems to know what to say about that.

Carefully, so carefully, Five steps closer to the body. He can't really avoid stepping in the blood. There's far too much of it. But he doesn't mind getting blood on his hand (it's been there for decades already anyways), and he reaches down to rearrange the limbs.

It's entirely superfluous, of course. Klaus doesn't care about how his body is positioned any longer. He can't feel the searing agony of multiple broken bones, much less the mild discomfort of having his arms extended too far. But arranging the body to look less like a piece of trash thrown carelessly to the floor eases some tiny, tiny part in the corner of Five's soul.

Once that's finished, Five reaches up and closes Klaus' eyes. He remembers doing it twenty-two years ago, and the same for Luther and Diego - not Allison, though, her eyes were already closed. Or Vanya, whom he never found.

He feels so, so tired.

Five leans back on his heels and looks at the body.

Klaus really can't be misconstrued as anything other than 'dead'. Not 'sleeping', not 'resting', and definitely not 'alive'. Likewise, it's very, very obvious that he died horribly. Brutally. In pain.

He wonders if the last thing Klaus saw was his killer's face.

He wonders if Vanya saw him die.

He wonders how many times he's going to fail his brother.

Five reaches out again, and brushes a few curls of hair out of Klaus' face. They're matted with blood, clumped together and turning stiff.

He looks at his siblings. "He still has Vanya."

They collectively flinch at that. All eyes flicker over Klaus' body. It's easy, far too easy, to imagine those same injuries being inflicted on their sister.

Diego sucks in a breath through his teeth. "We need to *find him,* then."

"How?" Allison says shakily. Her first word since coming inside. "Raithe - he didn't say where he was going."

"I have contacts," Diego says. His voice sounds distant, and he can't seem to take his eyes off the body. "In the police department. They can tell me who owns this cabin, where his home address is. Bank accounts, that sort of thing."

Five shakes his head, almost absently. "Kl-Raithe will be able to find him much quicker than we ever will. That's literally been his job for the past four and a half years. We'll be hours behind, at minimum. I actually wouldn't be surprised to find out he knows exactly where they're going and just didn't mention, so we won't be able to follow him and get in the way."

"How would he know where they're going?" Luther asks.

"Ghosts," Five says. "You still don't seem to understand the extent of his powers. He has access to an entire army of invisible, intangible spies. They aren't universally cooperative, but there's *thousands* of them. Millions. And he can go invisible and intangible himself. There really isn't anything that can be kept secret from him. I expect there were at least a couple ghosts who saw what happened and which way they left, and there's bound to be dozens more along the way to wherever they're going. He'll find them. Easily."

His siblings blink at him. If Five were up to feeling complex emotions right now, he would be feeling exasperation. Have they really never thought of the implications of Klaus' powers before now?

He almost sighs, but doesn't. Instead, he goes back to stroking Klaus' blood-soaked hair. It's a horrible parody of what Klaus does for him whenever he's feeling stressed, but it - well, it doesn't exactly *help,* no. But it's something to do.

"So what do we do, then?" Luther asks.

Five shrugs minutely. He shouldn't make plans. Whenever he makes plans, his siblings die. He's learned his lesson.

Then

very faintly

Klaus' body

twitches.

Five freezes.

"What -"

And then

Klaus *jerks* upwards and -

- starts coughing and hacking and choking and -

- there's shouting and noise and movement and -

- people yelling and crowding in and -

Klaus is moving

Klaus is blinking

Klaus is speaking

Klaus is -

Klaus is -

alive.

Chapter 40

Coming back to life is not an entirely new sensation for Klaus. He's OD'd several times (too many, if you ask Ben, but Ben is a real wet blanket about that kind of thing, so his opinion doesn't count), and getting brought back is always a rush. Actually, it's probably the last high he'll be able to have for a very long time, so he holds onto it.

Although that's a bit difficult at the moment. For one, all his other deaths have been a little less *thorough* than this one. For another, all the other times he's come back to life have involved less choking and coughing. Not *none,* but jesus christ, it feels like both his lungs have collapsed. He hacks up a glob of - oh, *ew,* that's a lot of blood. And then he coughs up *another.*

"Fuck," he says, blood coating the inside of his mouth. "Water? Fucking - water?"

No one gives him water, so he keeps coughing. Ugh. There's a lot of hands on him, holding him up and patting him all over, which, um? Rude. Honestly, the forwardness of some people. He hasn't even been bought a drink yet. Also, there's a *lot* of hands. What the hell, he just *died,* cool it with the groping.

There's a lot of noise, as well. People are talking - more like yelling, with varying levels of shock and panic. It's so loud, and Klaus whines and shoves his hands over his ears.

"Stop it," he hears, distantly. Then, *"Shut the fuck up!"*

He realizes he's the one who said that once everything falls silent. Blessed silence.

Gingerly, he takes his hands off his ears. He squints around him.

His siblings - Luther, Diego, Allison, Five and Ben - are arrayed in front of him, all their faces varying shades of pale. And Dave, Dave is there too. He's the only one who looks different, relief breaking over his face like a slow sunrise.

"You're alive," Dave says, like it's the most beautiful sentence he's ever had the privilege of saying. "Klaus, thank god, you're *alive.*"

"Uuuugh," Klaus moans, dragging a hand down his face. He only succeeds in smearing more blood on his face, and grimaces. "Don't thank *Her,* she's a fucking *bitch.*"

There's a small, choked sound from one of his siblings, he can't tell which. Then, very hesitantly, Diego says, "K-Klaus?"

Klaus waves at them tiredly (hello). He coughs into his fist, and wrinkles his nose at yet *another* glob of blood. Ew. "Yeah, that's me. Hey."

Five sucks in a shaky breath. His arm reaches out, hesitantly, and he presses his hand against Klaus' right side. There's a lot of blood on that side. Klaus pulls up his shirt, and while

there's a sticky coating all over his torso, his skin is smooth and unblemished. Well, isn't that nice.

"What -" Five says, looking uncomprehendingly at Klaus' skin. "How - how are you alive? You were dead. You were *dead.*"

"Yeah," Klaus says. He decides his shirt is a total loss, and pulls it over his head. His arms twinge a bit, but he vaguely remembers one or both of them being broken, before, so he's hardly in a position to complain. "You know, I'm not so sure myself? That little girl was mostly concerned with roasting me." And he didn't exactly pay attention to Dad. Nothing the old man said was ever worth listening to in the first place.

"Little girl?" Luther says faintly.

"I think she was God," Klaus frowns, and winces at himself. He's absolutely *soaked* with blood. His own blood. It's both disturbing and really, really gross. "We had a lovely little chat where she mostly just ranted about how much she hated me. Or, well, me and Raithe. I get the feeling he might have pissed her off once or twice, and I would commend him for that if it didn't lead to me getting lectured by an omnipotent eleven-year-old with an attitude problem."

"You're saying you met *God,*" Allison says, blinking at him.

"Look, *I* don't know, just go with it," Klaus says, throwing up his hands.

Something in Five's gaze sharpens at that. "Divine revelation," he says, apropos of nothing.

They all look at him. "What?" Diego says.

"It's -" Five blinks. "When Raithe escaped The Commission, he used a power that we deemed useless, and so he only ever used it once before. When he used it this time, he knew I was alive even though he thought I was dead for months by then. He has no idea *why* he knew differently, and called it 'divine revelation'. This - girl, she acted like she knew him?"

"Yeah," Klaus groans. "I think she kind of considers us the same person - well, you know what I mean - and she talked like I knew stuff I definitely didn't, so I didn't really get all the context, but they definitely met before. He never mentioned it to you?"

"He doesn't remember what happens when he uses that power," Five says, half to himself. "Not a thing. Meeting God is - *weird as fuck,* but it's not impossible." Then he blinks and shakes his head, and looks back at Klaus. "But that doesn't explain *you.* How the *fuck* did you come back to life?"

"I sorta tuned her out near the end?" Klaus says, shrugging. "If she told me, I didn't hear it. Although I doubt she did. She's not particularly altruistic." He looks over at Dave awkwardly. "Sorry."

"I can deal," Dave says. He hasn't stopped smiling at Klaus. "I'm fairly secular, anyways."

"Convenient," Klaus says, smiling back.

“Are you talking to Ben?” Luther says.

Klaus whips his head around so fast he hears his neck crack. After patting it to make sure it didn’t break (he faintly remembers the *crunching* noise his bones made, and wow does he ever want to avoid that happening again. Even dulled and jumbled, the memory makes him wince) he stares at Luther.

“What?” he says, voice high. “You - you believe I’m talking to Ben?”

Then another memory presents itself, and he gasps, and whips his head back around to Ben.

“Ben!” he shouts. “Ben, are you okay? What the fuck happened to you, you just fucking *disappeared!*”

“Oh,” Five says, wincing. “Right. That’s actually connected. Raithe summoned him and made him corporeal, it’s how we knew where to find you.”

Klaus - processes this.

“...Oh,” he says. “That, uh, makes a lot more sense than Leonard hurting you somehow. Man, I did *not* handle that well.”

“Leonard,” Diego says, eyes narrowing. His hand goes to his knives. “That’s the guy who k-*killed* you.”

It’s not a question.

Klaus sees the rest of his siblings’ faces harden. Five’s completely freezes over, dropping into subzero in the span of a heartbeat. He especially, but all of them in general, look absolutely, perfectly willing to murder Leonard the instant the man is in front of them, with ten times as much brutality as was visited upon Klaus himself.

Klaus opens his mouth.

He closes it.

He meets Dave’s eyes. Then Ben’s, solemn and knowing.

“Guys,” he says, hesitantly. “Um. Actually. About that….”

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Telling them about the actual circumstances of his death doesn’t go over as badly as he fears.

It goes worse.

First is the confusion when he explains the part where Vanya has powers. Klaus can understand that one, considering he himself went through a hell of a lot of it when he first found out about the whole ‘Vanya has powers’ thing. The thought just refuses to make sense

(Allison's rumor refuses to *let* it make sense). Vanya is ordinary. It's been the defining truth of their entire lives. Vanya is ordinary, they are not. *Vanya* having *powers* does not compute.

Then comes the anger when he explains the rumor. Well, actually, the anger goes in several separate directions. Luther grows furious with Klaus for telling them how Allison rumored Vanya. In retrospect, Klaus could have put it a *bit* more delicately. Allison goes absolutely deathly pale and sits down hard when she hears it, which brings out Luther's protective side. He's angry with Klaus for saying it so bluntly, angry at Dad for lying to them for so long and angry at himself for buying it his whole life, but Klaus is the only person there he can actually channel it at, so.

Diego, on the other hand, has absolutely no problem getting angry at Allison, which at least diverts Luther's attention from Klaus. They get into an enormous screaming match about Allison's powers and Dad's orders and blah blah blah. It escalates into violence briefly, until Luther slips on a puddle of Klaus' blood and goes stark white when he sees it all over himself. That shuts things down pretty quickly.

Throughout that whole tiff, Five stares into the distance with a look of cold, remote rage. Klaus isn't actually sure who it's directed at, and he doesn't really want to ask. He's been filling in for Raithe as the resident Five-whisperer for *way* too long, he's just gonna. Leave that alone.

Then there's the disbelief when he explains the part where he….died.

Allison just flat-out says he's lying. Klaus is pretty sure she *does* actually believe him, but she's drowning in her own guilt over rumoring Vanya and indirectly being responsible for his death, so she's not exactly in the frame of mind to accept it. She starts hyperventilating after a couple minutes, pushing Luther away when he tries to comfort her, and sits there in her chair, crying into her hands.

Luther has never dealt well with helplessness, so it's not entirely a surprise when he tries to take charge of the situation by questioning Klaus on every detail about his death. It's uncomfortably like an interrogation, and Klaus has had enough bad experiences with *those* (masks and blood and painpainpain) that he sort of shuts down after the first several questions. It doesn't help with Luther's disbelief (which is more of a lingering refusal to believe Dad could have lied to them for so long, with such thoroughness).

Diego has trouble with the idea of *Vanya,* of all people, committing murder. Honestly, Klaus is in pretty much the same boat there, because Vanya is the one who literally cried when they stepped on ants as kids. But even if Klaus' memory is a little fuzzy (jesus christ, he needs to *stop having flashbacks,* what the hell is wrong with him), Dave was there the whole time and quickly agrees that the whole thing was definitely an accident. Diego still struggles to wrap his head around it (of course he does, an uncharitable part of Klaus' mind points out, *his* powers have control baked in, it was easy enough for him to get a handle on them as a child).

Five's reaction is the most worrying, however. He starts by denying it, which isn't all that different from the others, but he quickly breaks off and starts mumbling about differentials and chemical reactions and other brainy things. He's breathing pretty fast, as well, but he

seems to at least be in partial control of that. He breaks off from his rambling in order to take a series of deep breaths. It's not *that* bad, compared to Allison's.

That is, until Klaus mentions the *color* of Vanya's power.

Klaus….isn't actually entirely sure of everything that happens next.

Five freezes, absolutely stock still, for several seconds. He's staring at Klaus, and oh look, there's that familiar sensation of being looked at like he's a completely different person. Klaus was wondering when that was going to happen again.

And then -

Five has an absolute *meltdown.*

That's really the only way Klaus can describe it. Five is hyperventilating like he's trying to suck in the entire atmosphere all at once, breaths more rapid and shallow than Klaus has ever seen on *anyone.* He yanks on his hair so violently some of it actually comes off in a small clump. He shakes so badly he falls off the chair, teleports several feet to the left then six feet backwards, almost certainly completely unaware of what he's doing. There's a noise in the air, and it actually takes Klaus a moment to connect it to his brother because *what the hell humans should never be capable of making a noise like that dear fucking lord what the fuck.*

His siblings are either yelling at each other or crying, and everything is absolute chaos. Diego tries to grab Five, but Five teleports again and gets *even worse.* He's pretty obviously hysterical, and Klaus has *no fucking idea* what he should do.

For fuck's sake, *he is still covered in his own blood.* ***He should not have to deal with this.***

But every other living person continues to be pretty much useless, and Klaus isn't sure yet how to manifest Ben and Dave so they can be the adults in this situation, so *apparently it falls to him,* even though he just got brutally murdered and resurrected not an hour ago.

Fuck, Klaus hates his life sometimes.

Slowly, Klaus levers himself to his feet. His legs are wobbly, but they hold his weight. He holds onto a shelf for balance, smearing blood all over the wood. He doesn't particularly care about that. Leonard can suck his dick (except not really, Klaus doesn't have *high* standards for that sort of thing and would have said he had none before today, but he has in fact found some, and Leonard doesn't make the cut).

Then he puts his fingers in his mouth (ignoring the taste) and lets out a shrill, earsplittingly loud whistle.

Luther, Diego and Allison all startle and break off what they're doing to look at him with wide eyes. Five….doesn't stop panicking. Well, that was a bit of a long shot.

"Can we please focus on Five's meltdown or whatever?" Klaus says tiredly, gesturing. "Only I'm not so sure I can convincingly impersonate Raithe…."

Allison seems to notice Five for the first time. She lets out something that might be a laugh. "Oh," she says, almost hysterically. "Raithe told me to rumor him if this happened."

"What the *fuck,*" Diego says. "Allison, if you do that, I fucking swear -"

"I'm not, no, no, I can't, please -" Allison says, her face crumpling and fresh tears spilling forth.

"*Don't* threaten her," Luther snaps at Diego.

"For fuck's sake, she's not the center of the fucking universe, Luther, our other siblings are are *all* worse off at the moment, so if you could just shut the *fuck* up about -"

Klaus groans, but they fall back into shouting and crying again. He grimaces, and carefully steps across the bloodsoaked floor over to Five.

There's zero comprehension in his eyes, or at least none Klaus can see before Five teleports a few feet over again. He's still making that *awful* sound, and it's that more than anything that causes Klaus to reach out and grab at Five's arm. That, and the fact that there's blood running down Five's temple from where he ripped out his hair.

He doesn't seem to notice Klaus grabbing him, just pulling mindlessly, jerkily, so far past shaky he could pass as a personified earthquake.

"I think you have to impersonate Raithe, sweetheart," Dave says worriedly.

Klaus grimaces. "Yeah," he says. Then, to Five, "Five? Five, can you calm down?"

"Hug him," Ben suggests.

"I think hugging him when I’m like this would be kind of counterproductive," Klaus says doubtfully. The congealing blood that's still *all over him* leaves smears on Five's arm where he's holding it.

Ben makes a frustrated noise. The argument behind them gets louder.

"Fuck," Klaus says. he looks at Five, trying to meet his eyes. "Five? Five, I really need you to calm down. It's okay, I promise. *Please,* Five."

Five blinks. A sliver of awareness appears in his eyes.

"Keep going, Klaus," Ben urges.

"Please, Five?" Klaus says. "Uh - for me?"

Five takes a deep breath, and blinks rapidly. The fucking *noise* stops, and Five tilts his head up slightly. His body goes lax - or, well, not really, but it's not a violin string ready to snap anymore.

"....Klaus," Five rasps.

"Uh, yeah," Klaus says. "I'm the live one, by the way. Everyone else is fighting, Raithe and Vanya and Leonard are gone, no one knows what to do, things are shit. Welcome back."

"Right," Five says distantly. He looks over at their siblings. "Right."

Fluidly, Five stands. Klaus lets go of him, and watches as Five strides right into the knot of siblings and gives Diego and Luther quick jabs that seem disproportionately painful, considering how they react, and slaps Allison across the face.

They all grind to a stop, and stare at him, shocked.

"Alright," Five says, voice steady and expression serene. It's way more terrifying than it has any right to be. "I am not going to make plans anymore. But if anyone starts fighting, I will have to stop them, and I will not be gentle about it. Understood?"

He gets nods from everyone in the room, even Ben and Dave.

"Good," Five says. He glances at Klaus. "Is Dave here?"

"Uh," Klaus blinks. "Yeah."

"Great," Five says dully. "Dave is now in charge. This family has never made a good decision in its life. What does Dave think we should do?"

Klaus blinks again. He looks over at Dave.

Dave looks back with a pained expression. "I just want to know you're okay," he says, helplessly, eyes catching on Klaus' bloodstained....everything.

"Right," Klaus says, looking down at himself. "I, uh, feel fine? But I guess it would be - smart, or whatever, to have Pogo check me over."

"Yeah," Dave says, an expression of resolve hardening on his face. "Okay. We go back to the Academy, and get you checked over. That's the plan. And then - then we can go after Raithe."

Chapter 41

Klaus has no fucking clue what he's doing.

Which is not an entirely new state of being for him. Klaus has spent most of his life confused about what exactly is going on, and what he's supposed to be doing about it. Plus the whole thing where he doesn't really *like* being the responsible one. Ugh.

Ben always handled that part of things. He was the one to know what was going on, moment to moment, mind unclouded by drugs or drink or sex. He'd be the voice of reason, the one to give sensible advice and push to do the right thing. It hardly ever worked, of course, because Klaus was the very definition of irresponsibility in life, flitting from high to high on an ever-rising crest of fear, hardly able to care about himself, much less other people.

He's had to step into the role since his death, though. More or less. And however much he still doesn't like taking charge, sometimes he's the only person around to do so.

Such as now.

Klaus grimaces as he runs, the wind whipping right through him. He races down the road, uncaring as he occasionally phases through a carful of people. He's *so* past caring right now, even if normally he tries to avoid that.

It's not guaranteed Vanya and Leonard will be at Leonard's house. Practically speaking, Leonard will probably push for them to go on the run, and Vanya - god, Klaus can't even imagine the state of mind she must be in right now.

He remembers his first kill. Even with all the death he'd seen before then, the murders he'd already helped commit, and never even interacting with the man before - he'd gone nearly catatonic. Five had needed to direct him into escaping, and guided him back to their room. He'd stayed with Klaus the entire night and next several days, because even if he didn't regard killing as anything wrong, he knew Klaus needed that.

It's so much worse with Vanya. She's just killed her own *brother,* and Klaus has gained enough maturity to realize that his family does, in fact, love him. They're shit at showing it, but they do. It's one of the things he put on a list to tell his younger self when he got back, which he still hasn't gotten around to doing. His family loves him, even if they're assholes. Even if they hate him too, sometimes. But he feels the same, so. No matter if Vanya doesn't really like him, no matter that she wrote The Book, no matter what, she still *loves* him. And she just accidentally murdered him.

Plus, Vanya doesn't have any prior experience with killing, *and* she's with someone who won't hesitate to manipulate her further instead of comforting her.

Klaus is going to *rip that fucker's heart right out of his chest.*

….Well, as long as Vanya isn't there. He's pretty sure she's witnessed enough gory death for a lifetime.

Briefly, Klaus thinks about his younger self. Has he manifested as a ghost yet? Klaus is pretty sure he did so within the first few hours of his death, but like almost everything else about that specific event, it's hazy.

It's probably too much to ask that he'll be able to become corporeal instantly, even if he isn't recovering from a sudden planetary-wide exorcism. Klaus blows out an unnecessary breath when he thinks of his siblings walking in on that scene - because he knows better than to think the note will slow them down for more than a second or two - and not being reassured that death isn't as permanent as they believe.

God, he can't believe he left Five to walk in on that.

Those two had *better* be at Leonard's house.

He's on the outskirts of the city now, and he knows this place like the back of his hand. He turns just a little bit, but the nice thing about being incorporeal is that you never need to adjust for obstacles. Just take the shortest possible route from point A to point B. It's come in handy quite a few times over the years, especially when working in The Commission (and probably most specifically in Calhoun, which saw him running across the entire city no fewer than sixteen times over the entire job, but Klaus has a habit of preferring not to remember how close they came to inciting nuclear war, so he shoves that particular thought away).

It's no more than a minute or so before he comes to the right neighborhood. He slows down and rubbernecks. It's just past sundown now, and he's only ever been here when everything was a pile of smoking rubble, but the general layout is unchanged.

He peers at house addresses as he runs down the streets, nonexistent heart beating hard inside his chest.

And then -

there.

The house is weirdly normal-looking, for the lair of an evil mastermind plotting to manipulate his sister into ending the world. Klaus can't even remember if he and Five ever scavenged it, if they picked over the house of the man who (as far as Klaus is concerned) murdered their entire family and the rest of the world. He's going to be spiteful and assume that if they did, they didn't find anything of use.

But he isn't here to reminisce. He's here to help his sister. He races inside - staying invisible, of course, he has no idea what kind of situation he's dropping in on. If they're here at all.

Fuck, he has no idea what he's going to do if they're not here.

Except -

they are.

Klaus screeches to a stop, and can't help the "oh thank *fuck*" that comes out of his mouth.

They're in the front room of the house, standing near each other. Vanya - looks like she's cleaned off the blood. At least there's that, although the probability that Leonard helped her with it makes Klaus' skin crawl. Leonard reaches for Vanya, and Klaus registers what he's saying for the first time.

"Your brothers and your sister, they were with him *every* step of the way. You *heard* Klaus, he admitted it. He didn't want -"

oh no you fucking don't.

In the span of a heartbeat, Klaus is between Vanya and Leonard, shoving the man away. He puts himself in front of his sister and puts on what Five likes to refer to as his 'baby-eating smile' (like the little gremlin has room to talk).

"You," Klaus says, his voice dangerously mild, "need to stop talking."

Vanya lets out a startled shriek, and Leonard rears back in shock, nearly tripping over his own feet.

Damn, you can't beat a good entrance.

"Klaus?" Vanya says. "Klaus - what -"

"What the fuck?!" Leonard says.

Klaus turns a bit, so that he's facing somewhat in Vanya's direction while still being able to keep Leonard in his eyeline. He gives her what he hopes she'll interpret as a reassuring smile. "Hey, Van. I'm *a* Klaus, yeah, but I think the more pertinent question here is your taste in men. I mean, him? Really?"

Sending Leonard a critical look, Klaus has to stand by his assessment. Really, even without the whole 'manipulative psychopath' thing, Leonard is *not* a catch. His fashion sense is *terrible.* Klaus resigned himself to the utter drabness of most people a long time ago, but it still boggles him at just how *bland* some people can get.

"You're dead," Leonard says, wide-eyed (and oh look, one of them is, in fact, covered with a patch. Klaus just keeps finding new reasons to kill this guy). "You're *dead.*"

"Guilty as charged," Klaus winks, waving his fingers (goodbye). Leonard just stares even more.

"Raithe," Vanya breathes.

"Yeah," Klaus says, more gently. "That's me."

"I - Klaus, I - is he…." Vanya is holding a red leatherbound book (which actually looks kind of familiar, come to think of it), but she twists her fingers together anyways.

Klaus softens his tone further. “He’s dead,” he says, because however little an obstacle it presents to him in particular, dead is still dead, and she of all people deserves to know. “I’m sorry, Vanya, I couldn’t get there in time.”

Vanya flinches back, and something in her face *crumples.*

“What?” Leonard repeats, staring at Klaus. “What do - how are you -”

“I’d explain,” Klaus says to him, a note of cheerful venom in his voice, “But I don’t actually give a *fuck* about you, so if you could just kindly fuck off, I’ll get back to you in a minute.”

Vanya drops the book to the floor, and hides her face in her hands. “I’m sorry,” she says, muffled. “I’m so sorry -”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Klaus says, stepping closer to her. He reaches out hesitantly - he knows how to handle *Five* when he’s like this, but Vanya is a whole different ballpark. To hug or not to hug? “It’s okay. It’s okay, it was an accident, right? You didn’t mean to, I know you didn’t. He knows you didn’t. He won’t be mad. No one’s going to be mad.”

“He’s lying,” Leonard pipes up from behind them.

Klaus gives him a sharp glance. “I am *not* -”

“You are,” Leonard says, folding his arms. “I don’t know what the fuck is up with you being here, but Vanya, he’s lying. Your entire family has been lying to you for so long, and it’s because they’re *afraid* of you. It’s why your father gave you those pills, why Allison rumored you, why they kept quiet -”

“Wait, *what?*” Klaus says, shock breaking him out of analyzing where he should materialize a hand inside Leonard to kill him quickest. He looks at Vanya. “Allison rumored you? Like, about your powers?”

Vanya looks up from her hands and gives him a watery, confused blink. Leonard sneers. “Oh, don’t play dumb. Allison rumored her to think she was ordinary, and you knew all along.”

“What the *fuck?!*” Klaus waves his arms wildly, looking between Vanya and Leonard with wide eyes. “No I fucking did *not!* What the fuck, Allison knew you had powers this whole time?”

“But you - he said,” Vanya says, voice small, “At the cabin. He told me about it.”

“He must have learned it sometime in the past few days, then, because this is news to *me.*” Klaus says, pinching the bridge of his nose. What the *fuck,* Allison *knew?* “And I promise that - well, apparently I can’t promise the others didn’t know, but I can fucking *swear* that Five didn’t. Neither of us knew, Vanya, I swear on my own fucking grave.”

Vanya opens and closes her mouth, staring.

“Don’t listen to him,” Leonard says quickly. “He’s trying to trick you, he’s going to lock you up or hurt you, Vanya, they’re all afraid of what you can -”

He cuts off with a choked gasp, because Klaus chooses that moment to punch him in the windpipe. Klaus easily catches him in a chokehold, channeling the slightest bit of superstrength so he doesn't even budge at the man's struggles. He maybe takes a bit more pleasure than he usually does when taking someone down, but he can probably be forgiven for that.

"I told you" Klaus says mildly, "that *you* need to *stop. Talking.*"

Vanya takes a hesitant step forward, and Klaus shoots her a reassuring smile. Leonard falls limp in his grip, and he lowers the man to the floor.

"Just knocked out," Klaus says to Vanya. "Promise." He holds up his hands (hello, goodbye) in a peace offering.

Her eyes flicker from Leonard to him, and she slowly nods.

Then her eyes fall on the red book on the floor. Now that he's looking, he can see it - oh.

It's one of Dad's journals.

It fell open upon hitting the floor, and now the pages are crumpled and bent under the weight of the cover. The embossed 'RH' stares back at them, pristine and mocking and aloof. Dad in a nutshell.

Vanya is staring at it, and something in her face - changes.

"I cause the apocalypse, don't I," she says, her voice so, so quiet.

Klaus pulls in a breath.

"....Yeah," he admits, because - hell, because of a lot of reasons. Because it's easy enough to figure out by now, because he's not entirely accustomed to the idea yet, because Vanya has had enough people lying to her lately.

She swallows. Her eyes move up to Klaus. "I killed you."

Klaus winces. "Vanya -"

"I killed you," she repeats, eyes distant. "I killed you the first time and I just killed you again, Klaus, oh god, I killed you and I killed our family and I killed *everyone* -"

Then she cuts off with a breathless gasp, because that's when Klaus hugs her.

He's only ever really hugged Five on a regular basis. And when Five was small the first time around, he wasn't all that welcoming of any kind of physical affection. But fortunately, Five is now pocket-sized again and Klaus has spent the last few days hardly ever letting go of him, so he doesn't have any trouble adjusting to Vanya's small stature. Actually, he thinks Vanya might be slightly *shorter* than thirteen-year-old Five, which is all kinds of hilarious.

She goes tense when he wraps his arms around her, and before he can think about it muscle memory has him tucking her head under his chin and rubbing circles on her back. It's - it's just like with Five, he realizes, and he wants to smack himself for ever thinking differently. Who would ever guess *he* would be the one to overthink things?

"It's alright," he says, the words coming out easily. "I forgive you."

Vanya gasps, and shakes her head. "No - Klaus, I - I *killed* you, it's not -"

"It is," Klaus says. "It's okay. I forgive you, Vanya, it's okay."

"I killed the *world* -" she says, voice desperate, shoulders shaking, voice hitching.

"Not in this timeline," Klaus says. "Not now, not ever. Vanya, it's okay. *I forgive you.*"

Which is when she breaks down, and starts sobbing all over him.

The key to handling meltdowns, panic attacks and nervous breakdowns, Klaus has learned, is to remain steady. Klaus closes his eyes, and keeps rubbing circles on her back. He starts humming, a tuneless melody he made up to let Five know he wasn't hugging a corpse. He keeps his breathing even and slow, so that once Vanya is able to focus she can match it. He sways a bit, gently, because she might take badly to being lifted but that doesn't mean some steady movement isn't comforting. He makes sure her face is angled enough so that she can breathe.

And he forgives her, although that one isn't actually so much a deliberate action as just something automatic, steady as the sun.

Vanya shakes and sobs in his arms, and Klaus doesn't let go of her for a moment.

(This is how the world *doesn't* end: not with the *bang* of a gun, but the whimpering of an apology finally accepted.)

Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They go back to the Academy.

It’s not a unanimous decision. Five would *really* prefer to go after Klaus - his Klaus, that is. He’s going after the man who orchestrated the apocalypse and the woman who actually enacted it, and killed him in the first place.

(Vanya. It’s Vanya. His sister caused the apocalypse, killed his entire family, destroyed the world. He can’t think about that, not for more than a second, not without feeling the slippery slide into another breakdown. He needs to compartmentalize. Focus.)

But Dave insists that they all go back to the Academy, and Five doesn't trust his own decision-making skills anymore. And after all, Klaus-the-younger *did* just rise from the dead. He's still covered in his own blood, liters of it, and the image of his broken body flashes across Five's vision every time he blinks. It's the right decision. And once that's taken care of, Dave and Ben will tell them where Five's Klaus went, hoping to find Vanya and her boyfriend.

This almost causes Five to self-immolate from sheer *terror,* because *Klaus is alone what if he’s hurt what if he’s killed what if what if what if -*

He might start panicking again. Just a bit. And maybe younger-Klaus needs to calm him down again, but that's neither here nor there.

Once he’s calmed down, however, Dave lays it out. He makes a good point that even if they do catch up to Klaus, there’s not much they can do. As far as they know, Klaus is pretty much invulnerable except to a very specific type of technology there’s no evidence Leonard has. And Vanya’s powers are quite clearly lethal when she’s sufficiently upset, but Klaus is already dead and shouldn’t have any trouble. If they all try to follow, there’s a good chance they’ll just mess things up and get themselves killed.

(Five’s other siblings look some mixture of annoyed at hearing this prediction, grudgingly accepting that it’s probably true, and deeply bewildered that Klaus is the one talking sense, even if he's actually only relaying Dave's words.)

Very, very reluctantly, Five agrees to go back to the Academy first.

The drive back is mostly occupied by Klaus interpreting conversations with Ben. Now that everything else is taken care of or at least out of the way, Numbers One through Three are very keen to talk to the brother they’d thought lost for years.

Despite himself, Five pays very close attention. It’s a distraction, yes, but - he needs one, right now.

(It's still one day before the apocalypse. That has to be enough time, right? It has to be.)

"- and I swear to that bitchy little girl in the sky, Ben, if you bring up the pudding *one more time* I'm going to pretend you don't exist and spend the entire rest of the drive in silence."

Diego snorts. "You couldn't stay quiet if your life depended on it."

Klaus gapes in offense, and sticks out a finger at him. "Excuse me! That is absolutely, totally *flagrantly*....well, *true,* but you don't need to *say* it….shut up, Ben."

Five rolls his eyes. He's sitting in the backseat, squashed up against the door. There are currently seven people in the car, although at least two of them are dead and don't take up room. Ben and Dave report that they're fine with sitting through people until they get back to the Academy, and Five tries to ignore the idea that he might be occupying the same physical space as either his brother or his other brother's boyfriend.

Allison is driving, with Luther in the passenger seat (he really wouldn't *fit* anywhere else). Klaus is in the middle of the backseat, with Diego and Five on either side of him. Both of them keep glancing over to check on him, with varying levels of subtlety.

He at least looks better than he did before. No one was willing to delay their return for a full shower, but he wiped off most of the blood with wet towels, and is now dressed in some of Leonard's abandoned clothes. They make him look utterly ridiculous - or, well, they make him look utterly *normal,* which is such a bizarre sight after seeing him dress so outrageously his entire life (and death) that it loops straight back into ridiculous. Klaus agrees, if his incessant fidgeting and whining about his clothes are any indication.

"I agree with Ben," Diego says, raising his eyebrows.

"You don't even know what he said!" Klaus says indignantly.

"Don't need to," Diego replies.

"Well, what he actually said was that *you* -"

"What did you do with pudding?" Luther says, probably trying to deflect yet another argument over Klaus' at-times-dubious translations of what Ben is saying.

Unfortunately, Five knows where this particular question leads. He groans loudly.

Everyone looks at him. "Five?" Allison says, frowning in the overhead mirror.

"Don't ask him that," Five tells Luther. "You'll regret it." he looks at Klaus. "And don't you answer it, either."

A look of delighted realization spreads over Klaus' face. "Oh my," he says, bringing up a hand to cover his grin. Five doesn't know why he bothers trying to hide it. "Did my less-attractive other self tell you of my foray into chocolate anal waxing?"

“Your *what,*” Diego splutters, and Luther can’t even manage that much coherency. Allison swerves slightly, before taking a deep breath and visibly hyperfocusing on the road.

“He did,” Five sighs. “Unfortunately.”

Klaus giggles, before he jerks his head to look slightly to the side. He gasps. “Dave! Don’t say that! If I’m not the prettier one, then I have nothing!....Don’t you go all ‘objectively speaking’ on me, I know how you feel about people who look exactly like me!.....oh.” Klaus suddenly looks *extremely* thoughtful. “That would be…*huh.* You’d be okay with that?”

Five has an idea of what Klaus is discussing.

Five ejects the idea from his mind and applies liberal amounts of metaphorical bleach to the affected memories. He deletes the last thirty seconds from existence with the ease of long practice.

“Hey, Five,” Klaus says, turning to him. “Did Raithe ever mention -”

“I am not discussing this topic with you,” Five says flatly, keeping his eyes fixed out the window.

“So he did,” Klaus concludes, sounding pleased. “*Well,* then.”

Diego looks at Five. “....Do we want to know what he’s -”

“No.”

His siblings never were very quick on the uptake, but in this case they thankfully all get the memo. Diego changes the subject back to Ben, which is how they all find out about Klaus being spurred into desecrating Ben’s statue by the subject of said statue himself.

Five tunes out the conversation. He looks out into the darkness, passing by. They’re close to the Academy now, just a few minutes away. Five feels the familiar well of emotions bubble up inside him, the frustration and rage and impatience and helplessness and, yes, *fear* that’s come to all but define his life over the past week.

It’s unfair. It’s unfair that he just got Klaus back and now they’ve been separated again, *Klaus is in danger again,* and even if Five tells himself things will be fine he can’t quite fully believe it, because no matter how many times he tries to tell himself that *it’s never fucking true.* It’s *never* been true, not once in his entire life. Sometimes, when Klaus said it, Five felt like maybe he could believe it, but now….

It’s not right. It’s not fair. He knows this, he’s always known it, but for some reason it *hurts* more than it ever has before.

Klaus could be hurt, right now. The chances are small, but they’re *there.* The thought of him being near Leonard (*or Vanya,* a small part of his mind insists, but he pushes it away) makes Five’s skin crawl, bile rise in his throat, sweat gather in his palms. Insisting *he’s capable, he’s strong, he’s going to be okay* over and over to himself grows more hollow with each

repetition because he can insist all he wants, but the root of the matter is that *Five isn't there with him.*

They've been together for the past twenty-two years, a team. And now Klaus is on his own when Five should be right there with him.

He wonders if this is karmic retribution for writing the equations to hurt Klaus. He doesn't usually believe in that sort of thing, but - but. Klaus forgave him far more easily than he deserves, and Five knows that's just what his brother is like but it's not *enough.* Five always hurts his brother, always. Everything he touches turns to ash.

Maybe, Five thinks, if he's not there to fuck everything up, Klaus will have a better chance of stopping the end of the world.

"We're here," Allison announces, coming to a stop in front of the Academy.

They tumble out of the car, although not with any real sense of urgency. Klaus still needs a checkup, but it's pretty obvious that his resurrection erased all his injuries. Unless he's been masterfully hiding significant pain during the drive back (which….wouldn't actually be out of character, now that Five thinks of it, but he's *pretty* sure that's not the case), Klaus should be perfect health. Because if his powers apparently include resurrection, why wouldn't it go whole hog.

They tromp inside and make their way to the infirmary, only to stop dead in the hallway when they see -

"Mom?" Diego breathes, and is the first to break ranks and rush towards her.

Five blinks. Grace is, indeed, standing there, and she smiles at Diego as he reaches her. "Hello, dears."

"Mom, what -" Diego stumbles over the words. "How are you…."

"Well," Klaus says, bemused. "Apparently everyone's getting resurrected now. Did *you* know Death took vacation days?"

"Mom, how are you walking around?" Allison says, stepping forward.

"One foot in front of the other, silly," Grace says, chuckling. "Why, how do you do it?"

Diego gently turns her arm, and Five sees that someone stitched together the synthetic skin where it was torn open. It's not an expert job, but considering how Grace is acting at least somewhat lucidly the repairs underneath must be masterfully done.

Which can only mean….

"Pogo," Five realizes. "He must have fixed her."

"Oh," Diego breathes, staring at her like she'll turn to smoke if he so much as blinks. She reaches up and cups his face, giving a gentle smile.

“I admit,” Pogos’ voice says, and he limps out from the nearest room. “There was a lot of damage. One bullet in particular hit her processors….but she is alright now. I’ll keep an eye on her, of course, but I think the worst danger now is some mild memory loss.”

“That’s great, Pogo,” Allison smiles. “Thank you. So much.”

“Yeah, that’s great,” Five says. “Can Klaus get checked over, now?”

“Oh?” Grace says, zeroing in on Klaus. “Is something wrong, sweetheart?”

Klaus laughs awkwardly. “Kinda depends on how you look at it,” he hedges.

“Either way, you still need to be looked over,” Allison says in a tone of finality, and she ushers them towards the infirmary.

The checkup produces predictable results, though. Grace does scans of Klaus' body, and carefully looks over his chest at everyone's insistence, before assuring them there's no indication he was ever hurt. She tests his bones, and declares them to have no evidence of breakage at all.

It's hardly unexpected news at this point, but they're still left scratching their heads over it. Grace seems puzzled at their insistence that Klaus was mortally wounded - *dead* - just a short while ago, and Diego has to take her aside so she doesn't damage her newly-repaired circuits trying to understand.

“Are you sure nothing else happened?” Luther says again, frowning.

"I *told* you," Klaus says, sounding exasperated. "I talked to the little-girl-god, and she didn't like me, so she sent me back! Nothing else happened!"

It's only due to Five's extensive exposure to Klaus' tells over the past twenty-two years that allows him to catch the lie. And Klaus *is* lying, although Five can't quite list out all the evidence that tells him so. It's more a feeling than anything else, a tiny shift of Klaus' shoulders, and the tilt of his head and the *slightest* off-tone quality of his voice.

He's lying. Something else happened.

Five opens his mouth -

and closes it again.

Even if this isn't *his* Klaus, Five knows that when Klaus doesn't tell people about something, he has a reason. It might be that it's dangerous or upsetting or just inconsequential....but Five knows enough about his brother to know that the usual reason is because Klaus is *hurt* by it, in some way. It took *years* for him to tell Five about the mausoleum, years for him to be okay with talking about some of his trauma out on the street, and Five knows that even now he hasn't been able to open up about everything.

Whatever else happened while he was dead, Klaus doesn't want to talk about it. And he's already had far, far too few people respect what he wants. Five keeps his mouth shut.

His siblings continue talking, and Five declines to participate. Instead, he goes over by the door and leans against the wall.

Which is how he manages to hear the faint sound of the front door opening.

He doesn't waste time moving. He doesn't even blink, doesn't even breathe, doesn't even *think* before he's jumping to the front door, faster than nearly any other time he's jumped before.

And in front of him is -

Klaus.

Five doesn't recognize the sound that comes out of his throat as he throws himself at his brother. Klaus catches him easily, arms wrapping around him in a tight hug, and Five buries his head in Klaus' shoulder. His heart is racing for some reason, his limbs all trembling, and he suddenly can't breathe all that well - although that could be from the part where he's started crying. Why is that happening? Klaus is here, Klaus is safe, it's over now. Five should be fine.

Like always, though, Klaus knows what to do, and he's rubbing Five's back and murmuring into his hair, nonsense fragments that are part lullaby, part reassurances, and part thankfulness that *Five* is okay.

Five is never letting go, never. He can't let go, Klaus might leave again, he might *leave.* Five might possibly say that out loud, mumbled into Klaus' chest, because Klaus shudders slightly and squeezes tighter.

"I'm sorry," Klaus whispers, sounding gutted, and Five hugs him even tighter, "I'm so sorry, Five, I didn't want to leave, I promise I won't again."

"You already promised that," Five says, shaking. "You promised *before* -"

"I know," Klaus says. "I know. I'm *sorry.*"

Klaus sounds miserable, gutted and broken, like Five just burned him with one of The Commission's gauntlets. Five flinches a hearing that tone, because he didn't mean to make his brother sound like that. He didn't.

"Klaus?"

They both look up at the name, and blink at the scene around them.

The person who spoke was Vanya, who Five just now realizes must have come in with Klaus. She's staring at the opposite end of the entrance hall, where the rest of their siblings are standing in a huddle. They must have come out from the infirmary.

Vanya is staring at younger-Klaus.

Who....she last saw dead. Right.

"Oh," his Klaus says. He regards his younger self in bemusement. "Huh, that was fast. Can you go fully corporeal yet?"

It takes Five a second to realize he thinks younger-Klaus is a ghost, and is making himself visible to other people.

Vanya flinches, and curls in on herself. She takes a step backwards. "Oh," she whispers.

"Oh," younger-Klaus says, his eyes widening. "Oh, shit, wait! No no no, I'm fine! Vanya, I promise I'm fine!"

He scrambles through their siblings, who react with various levels of hesitance. Diego actually reaches for Klaus' arm, but Klaus slips away and approaches Vanya.

"I'm not dead," he says.

"What?" Five's Klaus says.

"What?" Vanya says.

"Yeah, um," Younger-Klaus says, shrugging awkwardly. "Apparently I can come back from the dead? Uh, sometimes?" he adds, glancing over at his older self.

"Klaus, get *back here,*" Diego says at last, and he stomps forward and puts himself in between younger-Klaus and Vanya. He glares at their sister.

"Whoah, hey, Diego, what the hell?" Younger-Klaus tries to peek around him. "Hey, calm down -"

"She *killed you,*" Diego snaps.

Vanya shrinks in on herself further.

And -

Five remembers Vanya when she was a child, with bangs to hide her face and a smile to hide her loneliness. A violin to fill up her time, all the buckets and buckets of it that she didn't want because no one cared what she did with it. A uniform that never quite fit despite the tailoring, because no matter that she lived in this house Reginald made it quite clear she was never a part of the Academy. An absence in all the family portraits, because she was never deemed worthy enough to be there, as if family is something you need to be worthy of. A little girl who was barely a girl at all, and more of an afterthought to everybody.

God.

No wonder she caused the apocalypse. When had they ever given her a reason not to?

"Alright," Klaus decides, "That's enough."

Still holding onto Five, he marches between Vanya and Diego. Now the whole thing looks like a bizarre sandwich. Klaus gives a disapproving look at Diego. It isn't quite on the level of Five's own, if he does say so himself, but it's up there.

"We're not yelling at Vanya," Klaus announces, in a voice that allows no arguments. "It was an accident, she's sorry, let's move on. Preferably to the part where you got resurrected, because *what,*" he adds to his younger self.

"Move on?" Dego says incredulously. "She *murdered him!*"

"She's dangerous," Luther agrees. Allison jolts a little and looks at him in surprise, so at least there's someone on their side.

"Yeah, big guy, she's dangerous," Klaus says, rolling his eyes. "Guess what, *so are all of us.* And Mini-Me doesn't hold a grudge, right?"

Younger-Klaus blinks. "What? Oh, yeah, no, it's fine. It was pretty much my fault, really, I fucked up there big-time."

Vanya sucks in a startled breath. "What - no, Klaus, it wasn't your *fault* -"

"- and it wasn't yours either." Klaus says firmly, pressing a hand to Five's back in an unspoken signal to stay quiet. Five follows it without protest. "It wasn't anyone's fault, okay? Except Leonard's, because fuck that guy."

"It was my fault too," Allison pipes up, looking at Vanya with huge, wet eyes. "Vanya, I'm so sorry. I didn't know what I was doing, I was four years old and I didn't - I didn't think -"

Vanya's face twists up in pain, and a very slight tremor runs through the floor.

"Okay!" Klaus says loudly. "Everyone, I've decided. This is all way too much to work through at the moment. We are all going to get some space from each other right now so we don't end up doing something we'll regret. We all need to get a good night's sleep. And then tomorrow, we can come back and discuss all of - this - when we're in a better state of mind."

"What?" Luther says, bewildered. "No, Raithe, we need to talk about this now -"

"Ah ah ah!" Klaus says, shifting Five a bit and holding up a finger. "No we don't. If we keep talking right now there is *going* to be violence, unintended or not. I have taken it upon myself to avoid that. Now, Vanya, if you would follow me?"

He holds out his free hand to her. She hesitates, looking at it.

Then she takes it.

"We can reconvene tomorrow afternoon," Klaus throws back, leading her upstairs, in the direction of Five's room. Their siblings are left blinking in their wake. "Dress nicely!"

"I'll have my best outfit!" Younger-Klaus throws back merrily. Five lets out a snort, remembering when Klaus showed him his 'best outfit' once.

"Alright," Klaus says, once he closes Five's door. He flops down on Five's bed, still holding Five like he's a stuffed toy or something. If Five were any less secure in his masculinity (or any less traumatized and needy, he privately admits), he would be deeply embarrassed right now. "Alright. Okay. Wow. Did not expect that."

Vanya hesitantly sits at the desk chair. She looks awkward, but nowhere near apocalyptic. That's good.

Five nestles closer against Klaus' chest, and looks at her. She catches his eye, and looks back.

He gives her a small, but genuine, smile.

"I'm glad you're okay," he says.

She looks like she's going to cry, at that.

But she does smile back.

Klaus shifts slightly. "Not that this isn't touching, and all that," he says, almost hesitantly. "But, uh. I have a question for you, Five. Just a hypothetical."

Five blinks, and looks up at him. "....A hypothetical," he repeats. There's a sinking feeling in his gut.

"Right!" Klaus clears his throat, and looks up at the ceiling. "You know, just spitballing. So, uh, hypothetically, if I had Vanya's asshole boyfriend tied up and unconscious in the trunk of a stolen car outside, uh - what would you suggest doing with him?"

Five stares at Klaus for several seconds.

Then he flops his head down on Klaus' chest with a very long, very loud groan.

This *fucking* family.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so like. I wanted a big screaming blowup between all the sibs? But Raithe was like 'me and my 20+ years of emotional growth say no.'

Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Turns out, Raithe is wildly optimistic about how long it'll take to work through everybody's issues. It takes over a week before everything is out in the open and everyone is - not quite okay with each other, but not inclined to escalate arguments into fights. Klaus could have told his older self it would take that long (actually, he's a little surprised it didn't take longer) but he supposes Raithe has had a lot of time in which to forget just how fucked-up they all are.

Then again, he's not saying anything even *remotely* critical to Raithe in the next, like, ever. Raithe's chosen method of defusing rising tensions is usually knocking out anyone acting too aggressively. He's scary good at it, and goes about it as if he's mildly bored with the whole thing.

Klaus takes pictures. Seeing himself effortlessly hold Luther in a headlock when he wakes up every single morning is a fucking gift.

Currently, Klaus is rifling through the fridge, humming. He still hasn't grown used to the whole *accessible food* thing, and he's uncertain of whether he should. It's not like he's going to stick around this torture dungeon for much longer, and he's....not exactly certain whether Raithe was serious about his offer of getting a place together.

But he pushes that thought away and crouches down to look at the shelves better. Ooo, yogurt, nice. He snags it and closes the fridge.

Only to find Five waiting behind the door.

"Gah!" Klaus says, jumping roughly ten feet in the air. "Five! Would it kill you to warn a guy? I'm the Klaus that can get heart attacks!"

There's a barely perceptible smirk playing around Five's mouth. Klaus huffs, and pointedly turns his back on his younger/older brother.

"So," he says, fishing around inside the silverware drawer for a spoon, "You finally cut the apron strings?"

Because this is literally the first time Klaus has seen Five apart from Raithe since they were reunited. He knows they *have* been able to stop clinging to each other, if only briefly, because he asked point-blank if they went to the bathroom together and they said no. But he's pretty sure those are the only times they've been apart in the past week. And by 'pretty sure', he means 'absolutely certain.'

He glances back at Five in time to see him nodding slowly. "Yeah," Five says. "We're - well, we're not okay staying apart for long, but it turns out we *can* actually get on each other's nerves after an entire week joined at the hip."

"Oh, thank god," Klaus says, sticking the first spoonful of yogurt in his mouth and mumbling around the spoon. "There are limits to how creepily codependent you are."

Thankfully, Five doesn't do more than roll his eyes. Klaus has realized, relatively recently, that he can get away with a lot more than their other siblings when it comes to Five, thanks to his resemblance to Five's favorite person on Earth.

Speaking of favorite people, Dave lopes into the kitchen and smiles at seeing Klaus.

(He's still getting used to that, the whole 'people being happy to see him' thing. At least it's only Dave and Raithe, and sometimes Five. He's not sure if he'd be able to process *Luther or Allison* lighting up at their paths crossing.)

Klaus smiles back and sticks the spoon back into the yogurt container so he can go over and kiss the love of his life.

Keeping Dave corporeal is still pretty tricky, like trying to balance an egg on the back of his hand. But it's getting easier than it was when he started, when it was like trying to balance an egg on the tip of his big toe while blindfolded (literally all of his early successes were on accident, which he would be more bashful about if he cared about the distinction). Raithe isn't the *best* teacher (which he pretty much knew already), but he's had a few years to work out how to teach Klaus to do all this stuff, and his explanations *are* more helpful than not.

Sadly, Klaus can't keep Dave corporeal very well if he gets (ahem) *distracted.* So they haven't been able to do more than kiss yet, much to their mutual disappointment.

Oh, well. Klaus pulls back with a sigh as he feels his control waver. He gives an apologetic look to Dave.

Dave grins and leans forward to brush his lips against Klaus' ear. "Don't be sorry," he murmurs, in an absolutely *unfair* tone of voice. "I consider it a compliment that I can distract you like that."

Klaus maybe lets out a whine. "Well, *stop,*" he complains. "Stop being so - so - *you.*"

"Really?" Dave says, cocking his head innocently. "You want me to stop being me?"

"No," Klaus says instantly, sticking out his lower lip. "But if you could stop being so *smug* about it, that would be great."

"I thought you liked that about me?" Dave says.

"I do!" Klaus says, throwing up his hands. "I like it *too much!*"

Dave just grins, and even *that's* stupidly attractive. Ugh. Klaus is so gone, it's not even funny.

To him, anyways. Apparently, other people find it *hilarious.* He shoots a glare behind him at Five, who is doing a very bad job of hiding his snickering.

"Oh, don't be like that," Five says, rolling his eyes and opening the fridge. "If I have to watch you two make out, I get to laugh at you." He squints inside the fridge, before taking out a bag of cold cuts.

Klaus huffs, but melts when Dave takes his hand (hello). He goes back to basking in the perfection that is his boyfriend(!).

"Anyways," Five says, glancing over at them. "It's about time for the daily meeting, so."

"Ugh," Klaus says, tipping his head back and making an exaggerated groan of disgust. "We're all going to end up *well-adjusted,* aren't we?"

"I doubt it goes that far," Five says with a snort. "But these family therapy sessions have managed to avert the apocalypse so far, so I'm not going to let you skip it."

"Fine, fine," Klaus says, flapping a hand.

They all congregate in the parlor, like usual. Raithe is there before them, and once they spot each other he and Five go back to hugging. They cling to each other like they haven't seen each other in months instead of hours, and they stand there as everyone else trickles in, swaying slightly like they're the only people in the world.

It's always a little weird to witness, partly because seeing himself hug Five like that is just inherently weird, and partly because despite being only a hug, they still manage to give off the impression that they're doing something deeply intimate. Klaus averts his eyes.

Ben is the last one in, his nose stuck inside a book. He's taken full advantage of being corporeal again, to the point where Klaus has barely seen him over the past week. He's steadily making his way through the Academy's library, which, yay, good for him. He always did want more reading material.

Klaus decides to go and hug Vanya, because she's grown steadily more used to it over the past week, and he's pretty sure she's still not over the whole thing where she accidentally killed him. It surprised him, a little, how upset she'd been about that.

She hugs him back, though, which is an improvement on the first time, when she'd frozen stock-still and then burst into tears. Progress!

"Okay," Luther says, once they're all seated. "Uh, time to start, I guess."

Raithe hums from the couch, where he's sitting with his arm thrown around Five. He's sprawled out, much like Klaus usually does, except with a few key differences. Klaus doesn't have the effortless aura of coiled danger Raithe wears like a second skin, and his relaxed body language is thanks to just *not being afraid* of anything that might want to hurt him, rather than being so fucking *tired* of being afraid of everything he just decides to accept whatever comes at him.

Klaus isn't sure he'll *ever* be able to imitate that. He hasn't said that to Raithe, but a few days ago Raithe leaned over and said quietly, unprompted, that he was welcome to join in on

burning down a certain cemetery a few months from now.

He hasn't given an answer yet, but....he thinks it might be a start.

Their little family therapy session goes as normal. They discuss various topics, like the apocalypse (still averted, so yay!) and Vanya's powers (steadily gaining in control and scale) and Delores (and the question of her personhood) and Dad (fuck him!) and Leonard (no one's actually *said* it or anything, but they all know Five killed him) and that fucking journal (it was an interesting read, and by interesting he means 'traumatic') and Allison's rumors (she's gone cold turkey again, and Five even apologized for forcing her to use them, after prompting from Raithe) and Pogo (Vanya didn't take it well that he'd known about her powers and what was done to suppress them, and the monkey-man has been accordingly scarce ever since) and the fucking cell in the basement (which nearly caused him to have a panic attack when they'd first found it, leading Raithe to take him aside before anyone noticed) and Dad's death (Klaus had a very pointed conversation with Pogo about not giving *certain assholes* more attention than they deserve, so everyone still believes it was natural, and it's going to stay that way) and Klaus' death (which, like, he's still not sure why everyone's making a big deal out of it, but everyone gets upset when he says that, so he just stays quiet during that part unless someone prompts him to speak).

Eventually, after two hours, three shouting matches, four breakdowns, and one very expensive lamp getting broken, they all lay draped over the furniture, emotionally wrung out and too tired to talk any further.

Well, most of them.

"Hey," Klaus says, looking over at his sister. "Vanya?"

"Yeah, Klaus?" Vanya says, holding her hand over her eyes. She's curled up on the opposite side of the couch from Five and Raithe, which is entirely reasonable. These little sessions are always rough on her.

"You're playing again tonight, aren't you?"

"....Yeah," she says, removing her hand and looking at him. "You - you want to come again?"

"Of course!" Klaus throws her a grin. He's been to every one of her performances since her debut as first chair a week ago, and it still takes his breath away. Even when she's reigning in her powers, there's something *ethereal* about the way she plays, like the whole thing is a shimmery soap bubble and you're just sitting on the edge of your seat, waiting for it to pop into nothingness.

(She says that's how she feels about this new turn her life has taken, where she has powers and her family is paying attention to her and people care about her. Klaus doesn't understand why everyone *didn't* follow his and Raithe's and Five's lead and dogpile her with hugs when she admitted that.)

"...Okay," she says, a small smile creeping over her face.

Making Vanya smile is always good (he's up to twelve smiles and five laughs by now, which makes him feel unexpectedly giddy inside), so he cheerfully smiles back from where he's nestled against Dave's chest.

That horrible wound is gone now (it vanished a couple days after Klaus started trying to exercise his power, which is confusing but hey, he's not complaining), so Klaus sighs contentedly as he gets held by his boyfriend. Dave's dog tags clink against his chest, and he feels a warm glow of - well, he's not really *sure* what it is, but he's described it to Raithe and Raithe thinks it might be 'peace'.

He likes it.

They all lounge in silence for another few minutes, and Klaus is just in the middle of drifting off when he notices what Five is doing.

He's making *faces.*

It's so bizarre Klaus can only blink in bemusement and wonder if he's hallucinating. Except he's been clean for over a week now, and while his brain is kind of fucked up from decades of drug abuse he's never hallucinated something so *comprehensively* as this.

But he can't think of what else it could be, because Five is making a truly absurd number of facial contortions. He's acting like he's in some sort of contest to appear like he's being reflected in a nonexistent funhouse mirror. He's - what the fuck, that's *ridiculous* -

Klaus must make a noise of some kind, because several people look over at him. Not Five, though, or Raithe, who Klaus now realizes Five is directing the faces at.....and is making similar faces right back. What?

"Uh," Klaus says, staring.

Everyone looks at Five and Raithe.

Who....continue their little face-off. They don't seem to notice anyone else.

"....Uh," Luther says. He seems uncertain of what to do.

Diego has no such hesitance. He pulls out a knife and flicks it at the two of them. It flies between their faces and lodges in the couch.

Or, it would have, if Raithe didn't *move,* lightning-fast, and pluck it out of the air inches before it passes in front of his face. He glances at Diego with a raised eyebrow, the sharp edge of the knife gripped carelessly in his palm.

Then he throws it back at Diego. It doesn't curve, no, but it flies straight and perfectly accurate, to land right between Diego's legs. Diego jerks abruptly, and then tries very badly to pretend he didn't.

"You know how to say words, Diego," Raithe says mildly, and the effect is only *slightly* spoiled by how poorly he's hiding his grin. "I suggest you make use of them."

Klaus takes a moment to bemoan that he won't be able to become that cool until he dies for real. And probably not even then.

"Raithe," Allison says, saving the very last tattered remains of Diego's dignity. "What are you and Five doing?"

Raithe blinks, and looks at them. "Oh," he says in realization. "We're just talking." Five nods from where he's now leaning against Raithe's side.

"Really?" Klaus says, tilting his head. "Because it kinda looked like you were competing to see who could get their face stuck in the stupidest expression."

"That too," Raithe says without missing a beat.

Five rolls his eyes. "It's a nonverbal language made up of facial expressions," he says. "We invented it while we were at The Commission, for situations when we needed to communicate silently. Sign language was deemed - inconvenient." He twitches the stump of his missing arm.

"Couldn't you make it less - that?" Diego grumps, giving Raithe a side-eyed glare.

Raithe smiles beautifically back. "Where's the fun in that?"

"It works," Five says flatly.

"What were you talking about?" Vanya asks, peeking at them through her fingers.

Five groans, letting his head flop back onto the couch. "Something I dearly wish to forget," he says, staring up at the ceiling with a look of pure suffering.

"Aw, Fivey," Raithe says, patting his shoulder with a grin. "You know this has been coming for a while now. Twenty-two years, to be specific."

Five just groans again.

That raises a few eyebrows around the room. They all swap glances, and in a miraculously coordinated display of teamwork, agree that Klaus should be the one to ask, "Uh, what's been coming for twenty-two years, exactly?"

Raithe looks at him, and - *smiles.*

Five rolls his head around to look at Raithe, and heaves an enormous sigh. Raithe glances at him, and he waves his hand. "Go on," he says, sounding resigned. "I'll be fine for a few hours."

"Not very long," Raithe observes, eyeing Klaus.

"Consider it a challenge," Five says flatly, before closing his eyes and lounging back on the couch, clearly done with conversation.

"Uh," Klaus says, glancing around in confusion. No one seems to be any more informed than he is.

Raithe gets up from the couch, and comes over to Klaus and Dave. Klaus eyes him warily, and he bounces on his heels.

Klaus knows that look. He hasn't seen it from the outside before, but he is *very* familiar with that look. His wariness increases a couple notches.

Luther decides to take charge. "Raithe? What are you two talking about?"

"Well," Raithe says, still looking gleeful. "You see, there is one very important detail that I have chosen to leave out of my life as a ghost thus far. It's a very serious problem, you see, and I have *quite* been looking forward to ameliorating it."

He reaches down and hauls Klaus bodily to his feet. Klaus yelps a bit, and glares at Raithe for taking him away from his nice snuggly boyfriend. Dave stands up, looking between the two of them in confusion.

"What problem?" Allison says, straightening.

"A very, very serious one," Raith says. He puts his hands on Klaus' shoulders and says, very solemnly, *"I have not had sex in* ***twenty-two years."***

Klaus gasps. Over to the side, he thinks he can hear choking noises, but his entire world has narrowed down to his older self. "Oh my god," he says, and seizes Raithe's hands. "Oh my *god,* we have to fix that."

"Please," Raithe says. "I mean, if that's okay with both of you..." He darts a glance to Dave.

"What?" Klaus looks over at Dave, who's blinking dazedly. "Oh, yeah, we talked about it days ago, he's totally cool with it, we were thinking about how to ask you, but I would have before if I'd *known* -"

"Oh my god," he hears Vanya say. She sounds traumatized, but nothing is shaking, so he ignores her.

"I - yeah, that's - okay," Dave says, looking between them. Klaus grins.

He glances over at Raithe and raises an eyebrow, and tilts his head slightly towards Dave. "Of course, I have a condition...."

"Oh, of course Dave can watch," Raithe says, nodding. "I never would have considered otherwise."

"I *can?*" Dave breathes, eyes huge and an expression like he's just received fifty years of birthday presents at once. Klaus preens triumphantly.

"Oh god," Allison says. "Diego, give me that knife, I need to gouge my eyes out."

"Fuck no, why do you think *I* have it?"

Luther makes a noise like a dying whale.

Ben just sighs.

Raithe *cackles,* and Klaus can't help but answer with one of his own. Then Raithe *scoops him up in a princess carry* and smirks down at him. It's deeply, unfairly hot.

"Comfortable?" he purrs.

"Get to a room," Klaus demands.

Raithe cackles again, and then, ignoring the deep sighs of Five and Ben and the continued choking of the rest of their siblings, runs out of the room, Dave trailing behind.

And Klaus last coherent thought for quite a long while is to decide that he is very, *very* glad the world didn't end.

Chapter End Notes

BEFORE YOU START SHOUTING ABOUT THE SERIES ENDING:

THERE WILL BE AN EPILOGUE STORY.

I will be posting it in a couple days. It's going to be nice and long, never fear, and it's going to have a surprise I've been looking forward to revealing for a while now. So stay tuned! :))

But yes, this particular story ended now. I can't express just how happy I am with all your wonderful feedback you've given me over the past several months. I never would have thought about continuing this verse after the first story if it hadn't been for you guys. Thank you all so very much! I hope you've enjoyed it as much as I have!

Works inspired by this one

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!